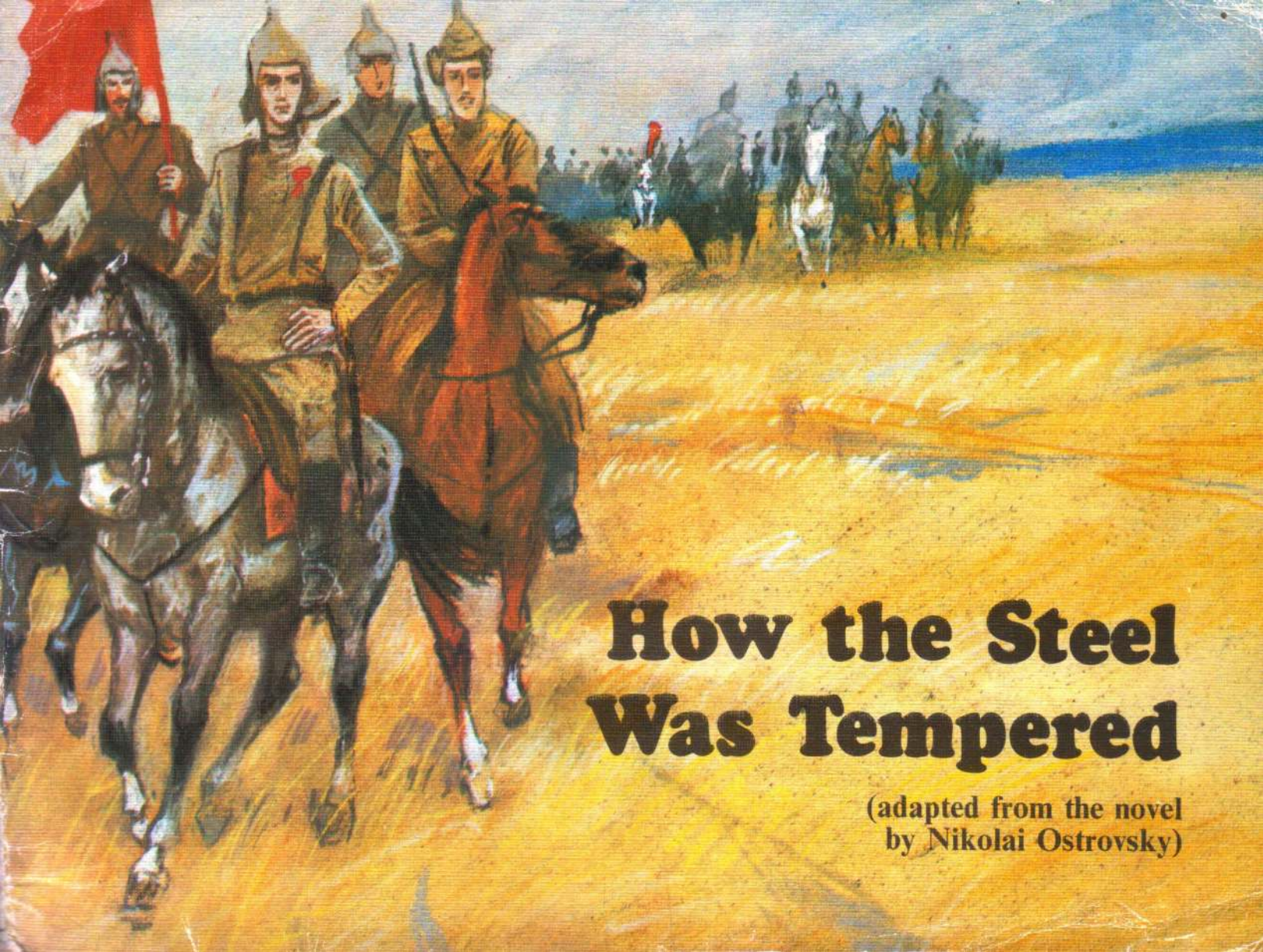

How the Steel Was Tempered

(adapted from the novel
by Nikolai Ostrovsky)

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Design and illustrations by Rudolf KARKLIN

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Moscow, 1983

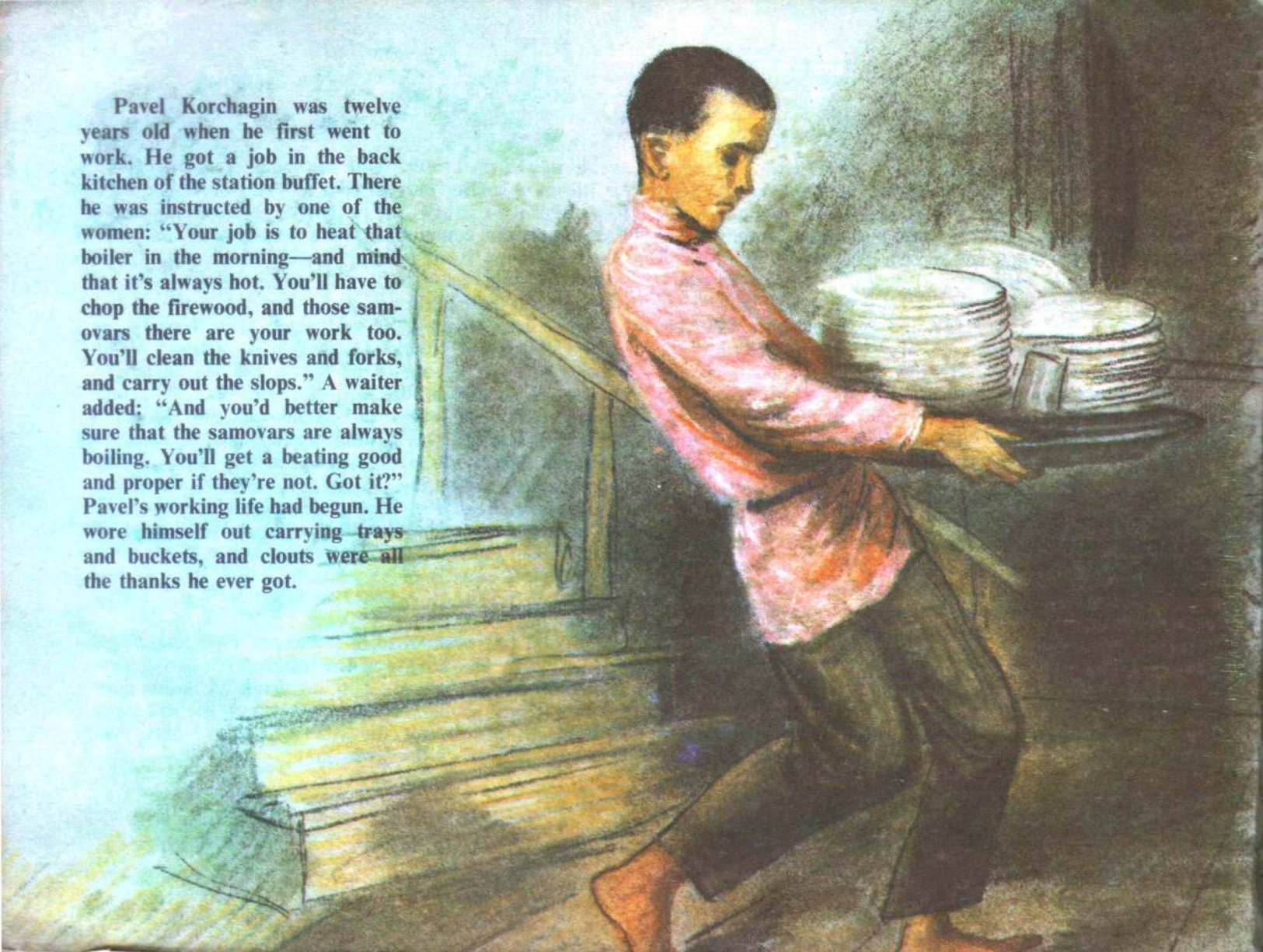
For over fifty years now Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* has been moving readers, teaching them courage and urging them to fight for a better life. It has been translated into many languages and adapted for the stage and screen. The novel's hero, Pavel Korchagin, is a young man typical of the epoch in which Nikolai Ostrovsky himself lived and worked. It was a time of the fight for bright ideals and of heroism. In 1917 the workers and peasants of Russia were led by the Communist Party to overthrow the Tsar, dispossess the landowners and capitalists, and take power into their own hands. A new state came into being: at its head were the working people's Soviets (councils), all people were equal and there was no exploitation.

Russia's former rulers and the bourgeoisie everywhere were unable to reconcile themselves to this, and their armed resistance led to the start of the Civil War. Part of the Russian army commanded by officers devoted to the old regime rose up against the new republic. The civilian population was terrorised by bands formed by people of all kinds opposed to the new society. Fourteen capitalist countries intervened against the republic, which, to defend the gains of the revolution, set up its own army, the Red Army, in 1918.

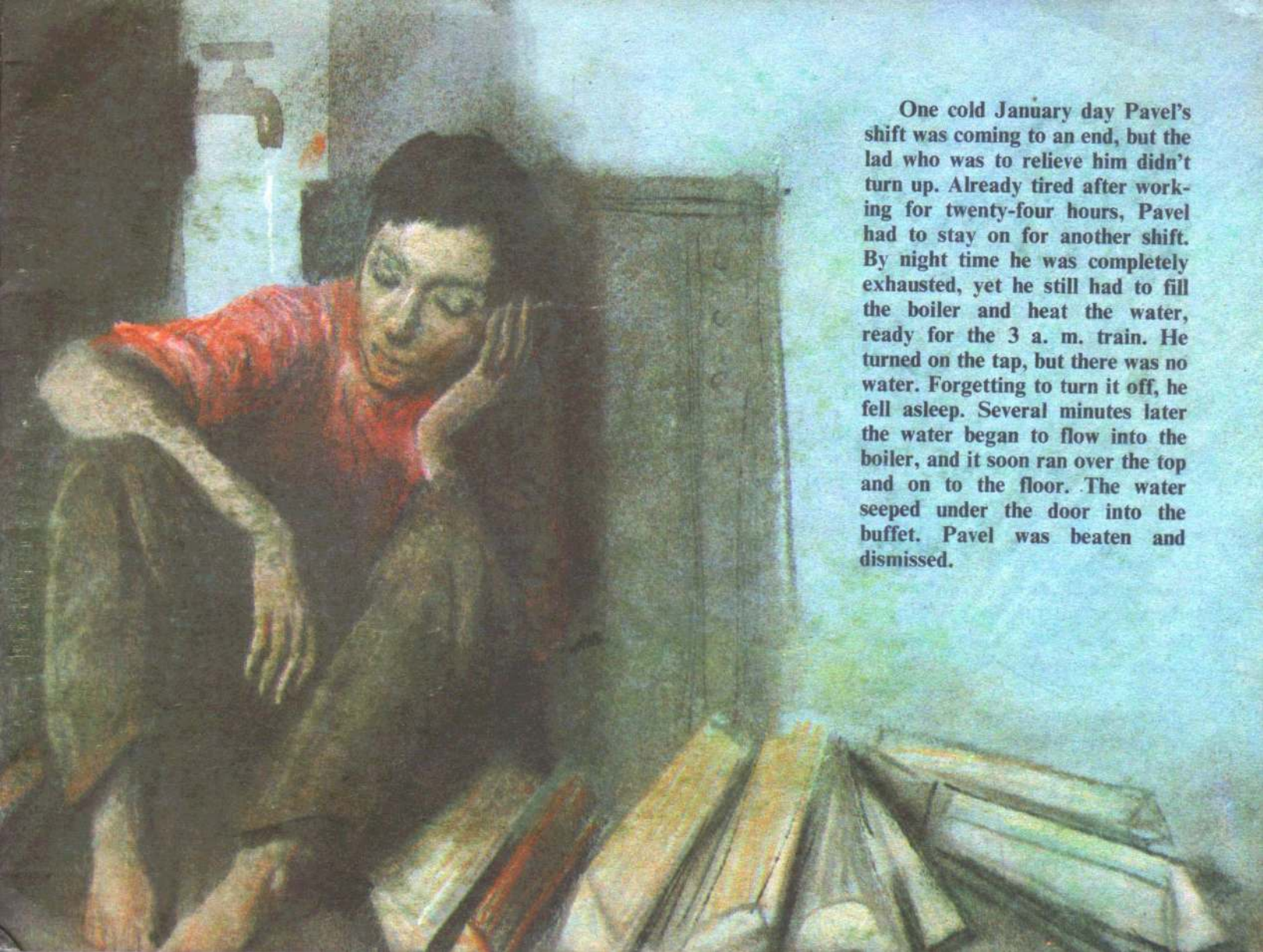
Nikolai Ostrovsky joined the Red Army when he was no more than a boy. He was wounded several times but always he returned to the fight. He was forced to abandon his life as a soldier only after a severe head injury. He then began to work for a town committee of the Komsomol, the communist youth organisation. By this time the country's war wounds were beginning to heal, and a new life was being built with new relations between people; in all these great new beginnings young people had an active part to play. Several years later, however, a terrible fate befell Nikolai Ostrovsky. As a result of his injuries he lost the use of his limbs and his sight. He became an invalid at the age of twenty-four. For him living meant being of use to people, and now the only weapon he had left was writing. That is how he came to write his largely autobiographical novel about young people setting out on the road of revolutionary struggle.

How the Steel Was Tempered was published in 1932 and immediately established itself as the favourite book of millions. On concluding it Ostrovsky began work on a new novel, *Children of the Storm,* which he was not destined to finish. He worked on it twelve hours a day until his death.

Nikolai Ostrovsky died in December 1936 at the age of thirty-two. His books, which inspire ever new generations to fresh deeds, make him immortal. "A nation does not forget such people. Nikolai Ostrovsky's life will serve as a bright beacon for the young," said of him Yuri Gagarin, the world's first cosmonaut.



Pavel Korchagin was twelve years old when he first went to work. He got a job in the back kitchen of the station buffet. There he was instructed by one of the women: "Your job is to heat that boiler in the morning—and mind that it's always hot. You'll have to chop the firewood, and those samovars there are your work too. You'll clean the knives and forks, and carry out the slops." A waiter added: "And you'd better make sure that the samovars are always boiling. You'll get a beating good and proper if they're not. Got it?" Pavel's working life had begun. He wore himself out carrying trays and buckets, and clouts were all the thanks he ever got.

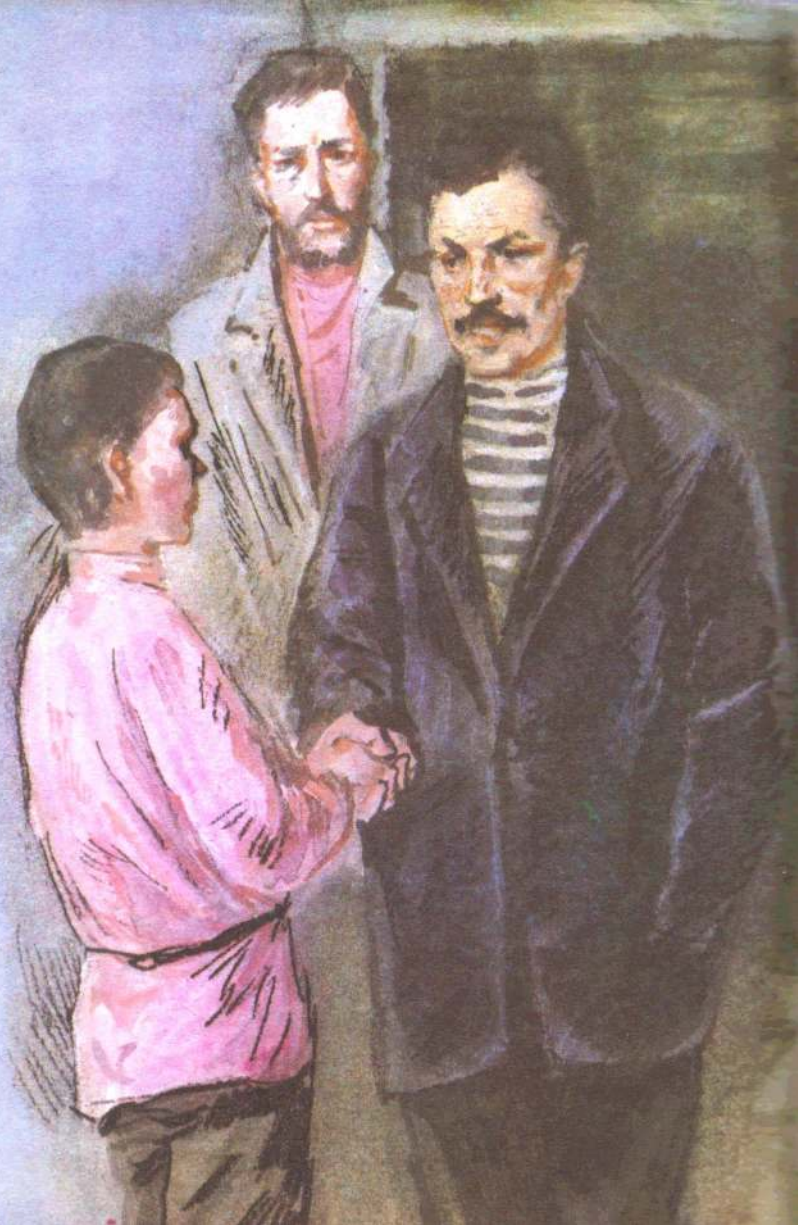


One cold January day Pavel's shift was coming to an end, but the lad who was to relieve him didn't turn up. Already tired after working for twenty-four hours, Pavel had to stay on for another shift. By night time he was completely exhausted, yet he still had to fill the boiler and heat the water, ready for the 3 a. m. train. He turned on the tap, but there was no water. Forgetting to turn it off, he fell asleep. Several minutes later the water began to flow into the boiler, and it soon ran over the top and on to the floor. The water seeped under the door into the buffet. Pavel was beaten and dismissed.

Pavel's older brother Artem got him a new job, at the electric power station. At that time the news that the Tsar had been overthrown burst upon the small Ukrainian town of Shepetovka where they lived. Hundreds of people hurried along the snow-filled streets to the town square. Eagerly they listened to the new words—liberty, equality, fraternity. Later that year, in wet November, people of a new kind began arriving at the railway station. They were mostly soldiers from the trenches of the First World War and went by the strange name of Bolsheviks. In the spring of 1918 a partisan detachment entered the town.

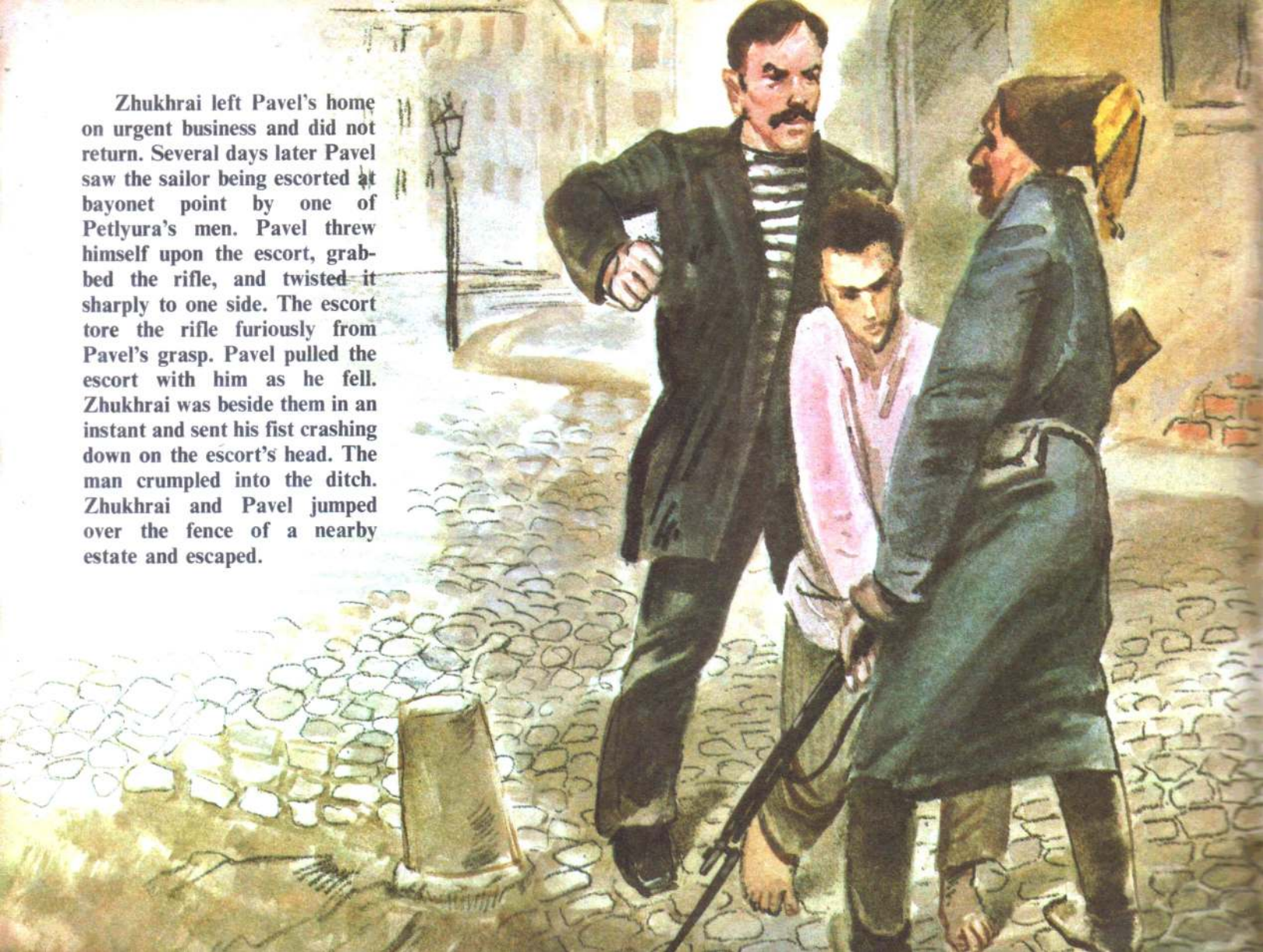
As the German Army advanced upon Shepetovka, the partisans were forced to abandon the town. The detachment commander said: "We will be able to fight only when we join up with other retreating Red units. As we are the last to leave, it's up to us to organise work in the German rear. We must have a reliable comrade at the power station. Let's hear your nominations." "Fyodor Zhukhrai the sailor," said one of the commander's aides. "For a start he's a local man. Then he's a fitter and mechanic and will be able to get a job at the station. Nobody's seen him with our detachment. He's got a good head on his shoulders and he'll put things straight here."

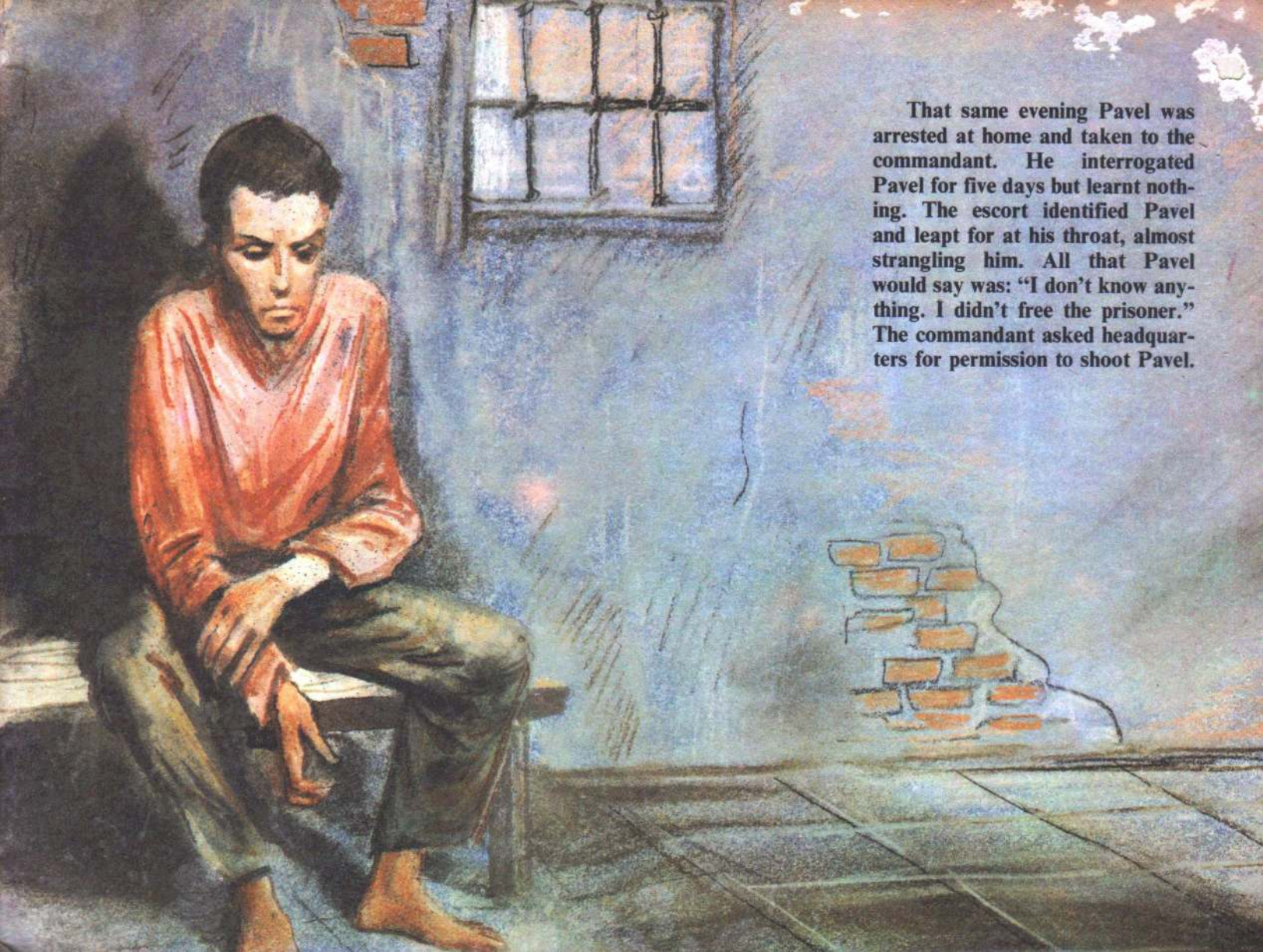
When Pavel got home on the evening of the next day Artem was sitting at the table with a stranger. "This is that brother of mine, Fyodor," said Artem to the stranger, who held out his hand to Pavel. "Pavel," said Artem, "didn't you say that a fitter had gone off sick at the station? Ask them tomorrow whether they'll take a skilled man in his place." "Of course they will. The boss was looking for a replacement but couldn't find one." "Well, that's settled then," said the stranger. "Tomorrow I'll go to the station with you and speak to the boss myself."



The Germans did not stay long in the town. Soon Ataman Petlyura's bands took over from them. The looting, raping and killing began again. Petlyura's men tried to capture Fyodor, but he managed to escape. He hid for several days at the Korchagins' home, and in that time he explained a great deal to Pavel. "What are you really, Fyodor?" Pavel asked him once. "I think you're either a Bolshevik or a Communist." Zhukhrai thumped his chest in jest and laughed heartily. "There's no doubt about that, my lad. That's as true as the fact that a Bolshevik and a Communist is the same thing."

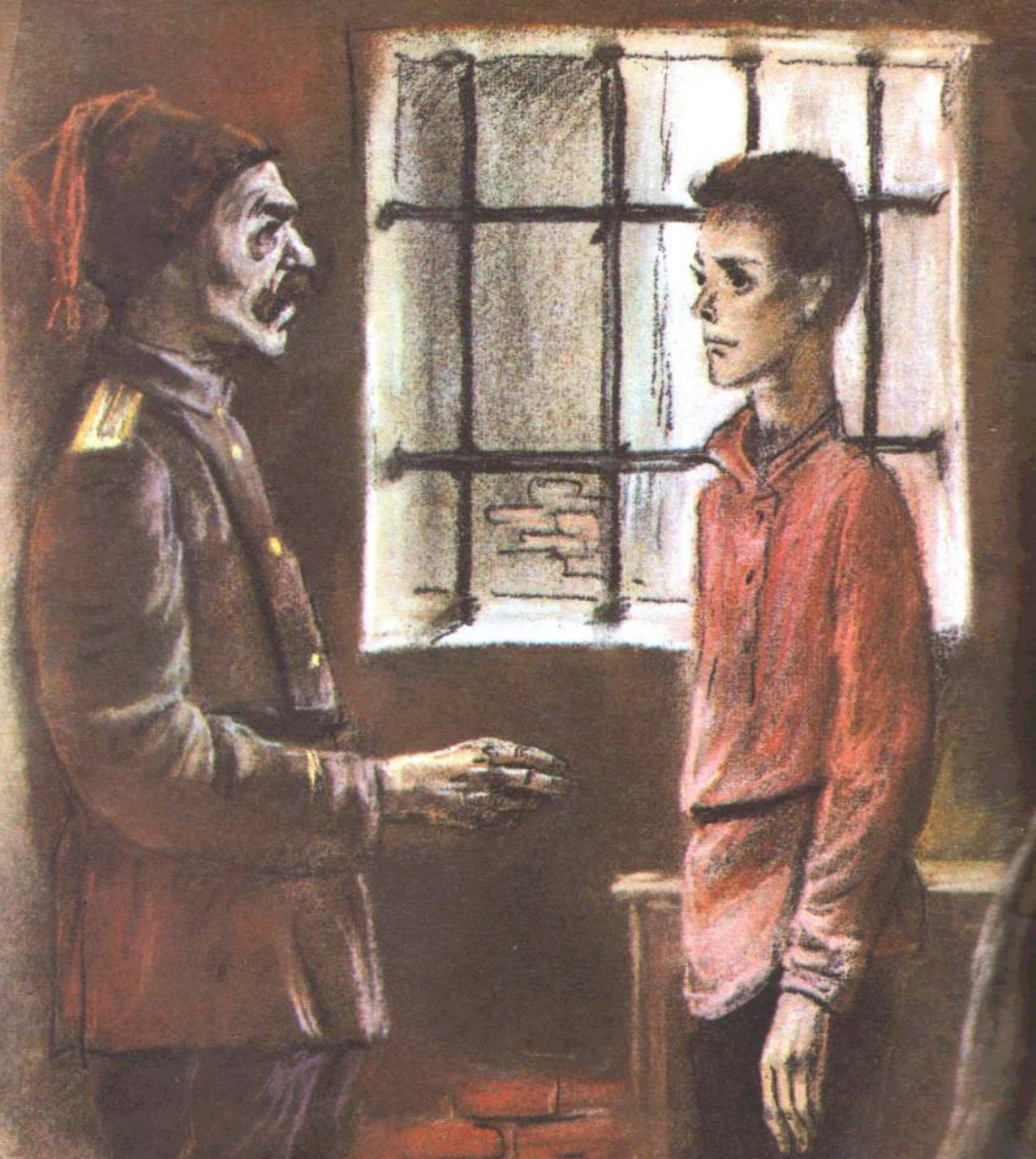
Zhukhrai left Pavel's home on urgent business and did not return. Several days later Pavel saw the sailor being escorted at bayonet point by one of Petlyura's men. Pavel threw himself upon the escort, grabbed the rifle, and twisted it sharply to one side. The escort tore the rifle furiously from Pavel's grasp. Pavel pulled the escort with him as he fell. Zhukhrai was beside them in an instant and sent his fist crashing down on the escort's head. The man crumpled into the ditch. Zhukhrai and Pavel jumped over the fence of a nearby estate and escaped.





That same evening Pavel was arrested at home and taken to the commandant. He interrogated Pavel for five days but learnt nothing. The escort identified Pavel and leapt for at his throat, almost strangling him. All that Pavel would say was: "I don't know anything. I didn't free the prisoner." The commandant asked headquarters for permission to shoot Pavel.

Mere chance saved Pavel from death. Colonel Chernyak, a close associate of Ataman Petlyura, demanded to be shown the cellars where the prisoners were held. When Chernyak asked Pavel what he had been arrested for, he replied: "Two Cossack soldiers are billeted at our house. I cut a piece of leather from one of the old saddles to sole my shoe, and the Cossacks brought me here." The colonel looked at Pavel with scorn and said: "You can go home, and tell your father to give you the hiding you deserve." Pavel could hardly believe his ears. He made a dash for the door.



When Petlyura's men were driven out of the town Pavel joined the Red Army. For a long time he sent no news and his mother often wept. Then one evening Artem announced as he came in that he had a letter from Pavel. "Dear Artem, I am alive but not altogether well. I was shot in the hip but I'm on the mend now. I'm serving in the Kotovsky Cavalry Brigade. Is mother all right? Give her my fondest love. Forgive me for any anxiety I've caused you. Your brother Pavel."

Pavel had already been fighting for a year. He had grown into a strong young man. In that year he had seen many terrible things. With thousands of others he was fighting to keep his class in power. Only twice in that time had he left the fighting ranks because of wounds or illness.

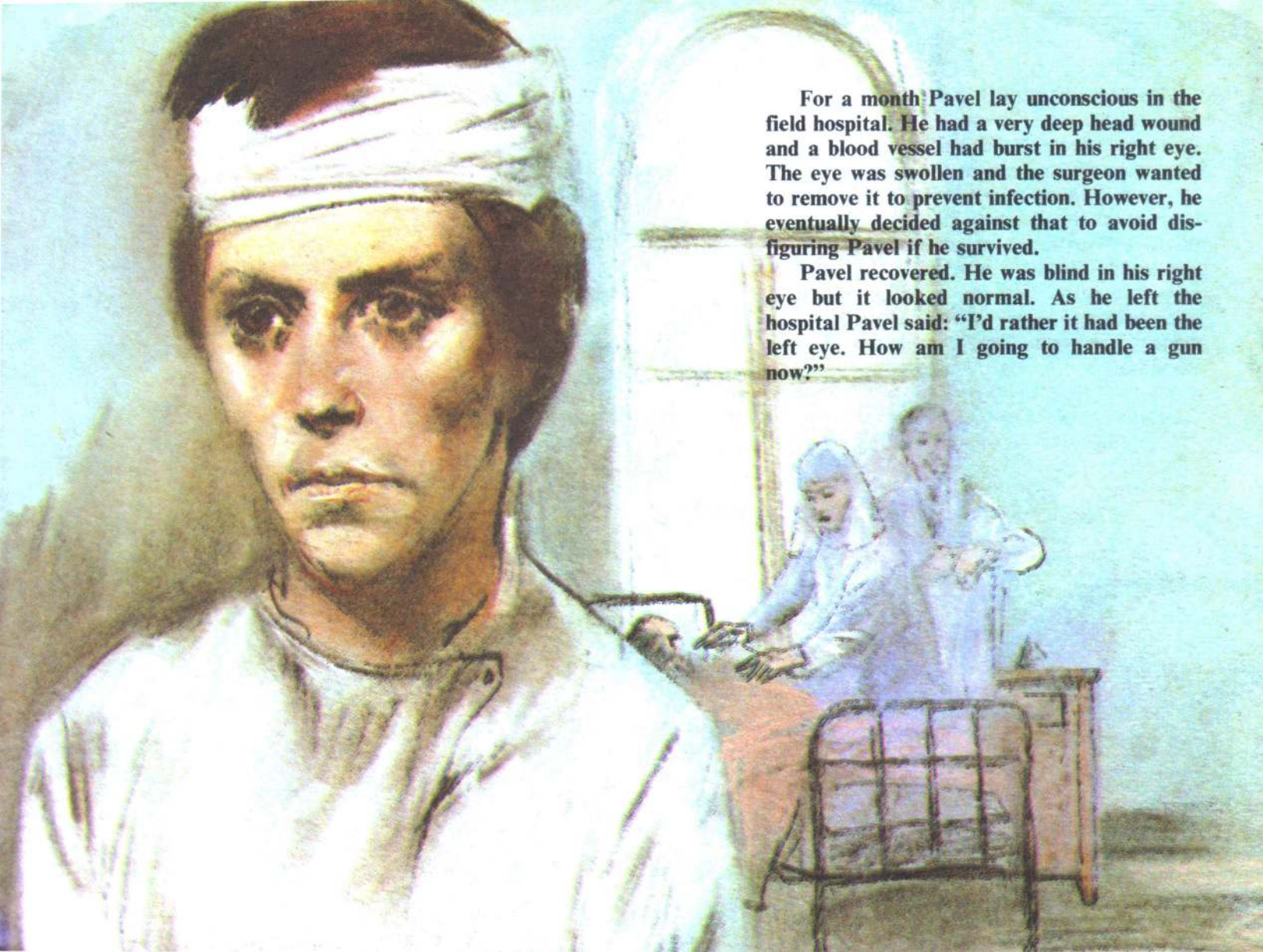
Pavel had transferred to Budyonny's First Cavalry Army. The men were taking a rest in the village they had entered. A strong young lad was sitting on the back of a machine-gun cart playing an accordion. He couldn't keep in time, and the dashing horseman couldn't get into the swing of the dance. Pavel made his way over to the cart. The player stopped the music and asked: "What do you want?" Korchagin stretched out his hand to take the instrument saying: "Let me have a go." Uncertainly the lad took the strap from his shoulder. Pavel placed the accordion on his knee with an accustomed movement and began to play. Like a bird, the dancer spread out his arms and began circling, kicking out his legs in complicated movements.

The Red Army cavalry was attacking the interventionists. Pavel flew ahead, bending low over his horse's neck. A fellow rider cut down one of the enemy remorselessly before Pavel's eyes. Suddenly, at an intersection, the riders saw three men in blue uniforms bending over a machine-gun. A fourth with gold braid on his collar, an officer, saw the charging horsemen and held his Mauser at the ready. Pavel, unable to restrain his horse, bore straight down on the machine-gun. The officer fired. The bullet whistled past Pavel's cheek. The galloping horse pushed the officer over. The machine-gun gave a wild burst of fire. Pavel's horse reared and carried him straight into the enemy soldiers.

One day Pavel was sent to the railway station with sealed orders.

He stopped by the engine and asked: "Who's the commander?" A man covered in leather from head to foot turned round and said: "I am." Pavel took the package from his pocket and said: "I've got your orders here. Sign on the envelope." Someone meanwhile was busy with an oil can by the engine's wheels. "There you are," said the commander, handing Pavel the envelope. The man by the engine straightened up and turned round. Pavel jumped from his horse: "Artem, brother!" "Pavel, is it really you?" exclaimed Artem, unable to believe his eyes.

In the fighting near Lvov, during a cavalry charge, Pavel lost his cap. He reined in his horse. The cavalry ahead had already run into ranks of the enemy. Suddenly a soldier leapt out of the bushes shouting: "The division commander's been killed!" Fury seized Pavel and he flung himself into the thick of the fighting. The soldiers, enraged by their commanding officer's death, wiped out the enemy platoon. They charged out into the open field after the retreating enemy, but artillery opened up on them. A green flame flared before Pavel's eyes and there was a roaring in his ears. He was thrown over his horse's head and hit the ground heavily.



For a month Pavel lay unconscious in the field hospital. He had a very deep head wound and a blood vessel had burst in his right eye. The eye was swollen and the surgeon wanted to remove it to prevent infection. However, he eventually decided against that to avoid disfiguring Pavel if he survived.

Pavel recovered. He was blind in his right eye but it looked normal. As he left the hospital Pavel said: "I'd rather it had been the left eye. How am I going to handle a gun now?"

From the hospital Pavel travelled to Kiev. There in the street he saw an order posted up which had been signed by Fyodor Zhukhrai, Chairman of the local Cheka, an official body set up to combat counter-revolution. Pavel's heart leapt. Fyodor, who had lost an arm at the Civil War front, was glad to see him. They got straight down to business. "You can help me get to grips with the counter-revolutionaries here until you're strong enough for the front. You can start tomorrow," said Zhukhrai.

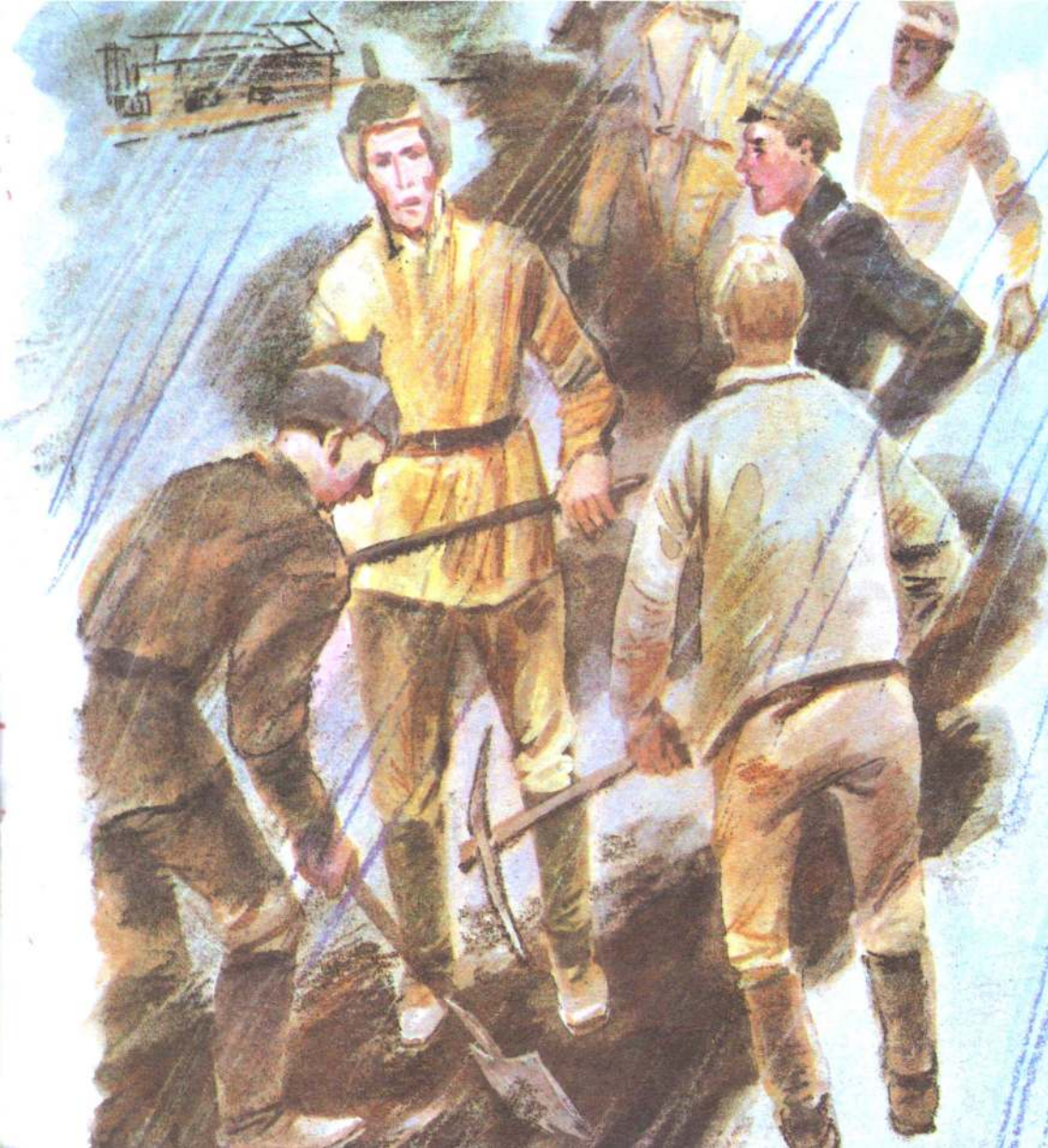
The Red Army was advancing on the Crimea to wipe out the last counter-revolutionary stronghold. Trainloads of Red Army soldiers were passing through Kiev on their way to the south; open goods trucks were loaded with carts, field kitchens and guns. Telegrams poured into Kiev demanding that the lines be cleared for such and such a division. It was the job of the transport branch of the Cheka, where Pavel was now working, to sort out the mess. Unit commanders would burst into their offices, brandishing revolvers and demanding that their men be moved on immediately.

Working for the Cheka told on Pavel's health, which was still poor. After two nights without sleep he fainted. He went to Fyodor and said: "Fyodor, I want to work at my trade in the railway shops. I feel out of my depth here. The medical commission told me that I was unfit for military service, but this is worse than the front."

The regional committee of the Komsomol made Pavel secretary of the Komsomol group in the railway workshops.

In December 1920 Pavel travelled to Shepetovka to see his family. His mother wept tears of joy to see him. Her eyes shone with happiness once more. Her joy knew no bounds when three days later Artem arrived in the middle of the night. Pavel spent only two weeks at home and then returned to Kiev, to the work awaiting him.

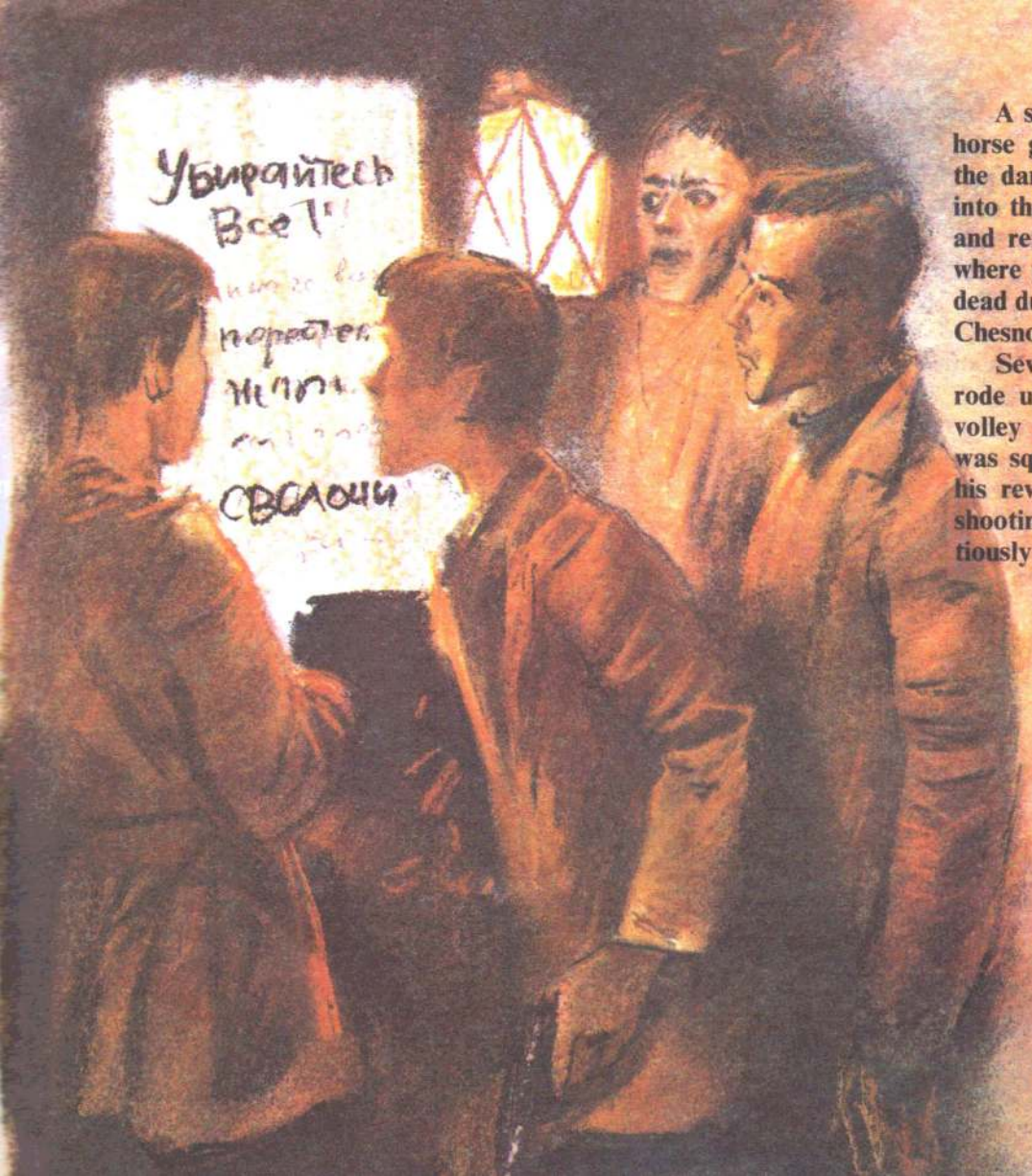
One more year passed. New enemies were now at the city's throat: with the railways at a standstill there was a fuel shortage, which would mean starvation and cold in the winter. Everything depended on firewood and bread. Thirteen men huddled over a map in the office of the local Soviet chairman. "Look," said Fyodor, "there's the railway station, and there's the logging site six kilometres away. Those two hundred and ten thousand cubic metres of firewood stocked here have to be got over those six kilometres to the station. There's only one way, comrades, and that's to build a narrow-gauge track from the station to the timber in the next three months. That'll take three hundred and fifty workers and two engineers. There's only an old, disused school for them to live in. We'll have to send the workers out in parties for two weeks at a time, they won't be able to stand more than that."



The men were digging furiously to build the embankment for the railway line. The rain was falling in a fine drizzle. The stone skeleton of the old school loomed grimly. There were gaping holes instead of windows and doors, and black slits instead of stove doors. The concrete floor in the four large rooms was all that remained intact. At night time four hundred men in wet and muddy clothes lay down on it to sleep, huddling together for warmth. Their clothes did not dry out. Rain dripped onto the floor through the sacks hung on the window frames, and the wind blew through the open doorways. In the morning they drank tea and went off to work on the embankment. Every day at lunchtime they ate boiled lentils of which they were heartily sick, and bread as black as coal.

The rain just didn't stop. Pavel pulled his foot out of the thick mud with difficulty and the rotten sole of his boot came away completely. He went into the school building with the remains of his boot. He sat down by the stove and stretched out his cold and numb foot to the heat. The lineman's wife said to him: "Don't count on getting your lunch early. I can see you're skiving off from work, laddie. Where do you think you're putting your feet? This is a kitchen not a bath house." "My boot's fallen to bits," said Pavel. The woman felt ashamed of her harsh words: "I took you for a loafer." She looked at the boot. "No point in trying to patch it together. I'll give you an old galosh and some thick linen to wrap round your foot." Pavel silently threw her a look of gratitude.

Tokarev, the elderly man in charge of building the line, came back from the city in a furious mood. He called the leading Communists to him and said: "I've got to be honest with you, boys. There's nothing doing. We couldn't get together a group to replace you. It'll start to freeze any time now and before that we've got to get across the swamp if it kills us. How can we call ourselves Bolsheviks if we don't? We'll hold a meeting today and explain the situation. In the morning those who aren't Party members can go home, and we'll stay on the job."

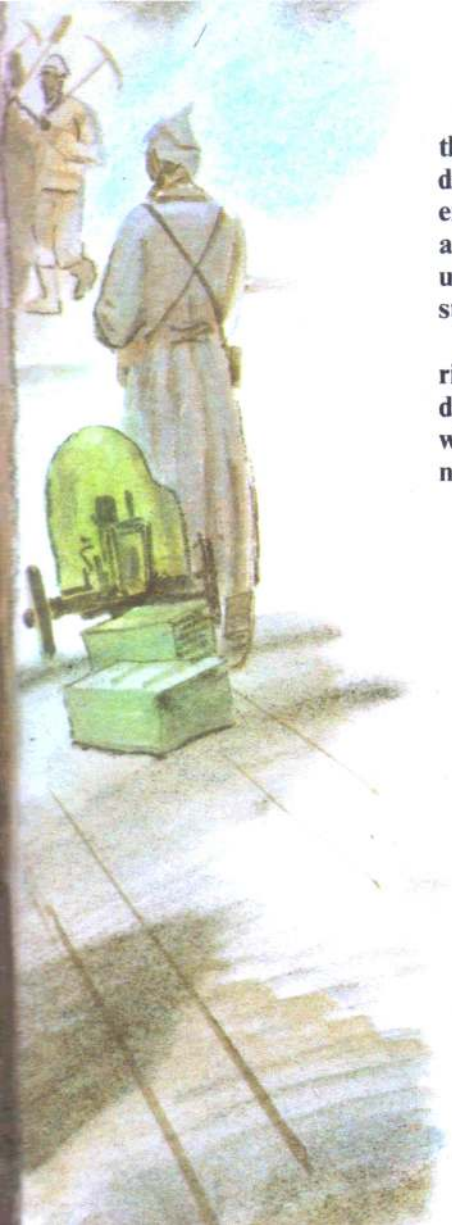


A shot rang out in the forest. A man on a horse galloped away from the barracks into the darkness. A piece of plywood was stuck into the doorframe. Someone struck a match and read: "Clear out of the station back to where you came from. Anyone who stays is a dead duck. Be out by tomorrow night. Ataman Chesnok."

Several days later a dozen or so horsemen rode up to the barracks in the darkness. A volley resounded in the night silence. Pavel was squatting down, feeling the cartridges in his revolver drum with nervous fingers. The shooting stopped. Pavel opened the door cautiously. There was no one there.

At midday a trolley arrived from the city bringing Fyodor and Akim, the secretary of the regional Party committee. They were met by Tokarev. "The raid by the bandits is only half the trouble. There's a steep slope in the way of the track. We'll have to dig away a lot of earth." Akim asked him: "Will you finish the line on time?" "You know, to tell the truth, it's impossible, but then again it has to be done. We're here for the second month now, and we're coming to the end of the fourth replacement shift. The main body has been here non-stop, and it's only their youth keeps them going. Look at them: they're worth their weight in gold."

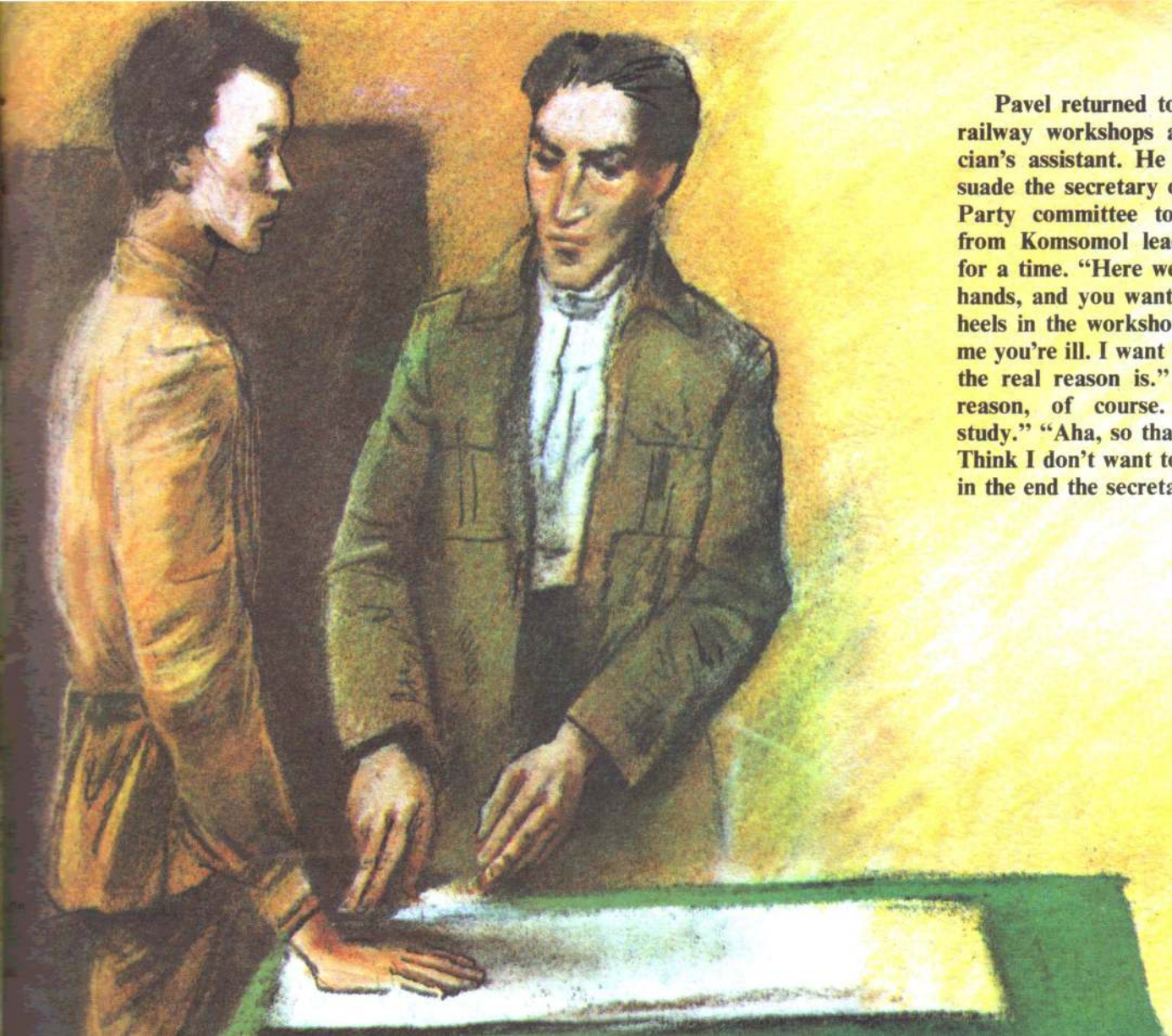
Zhukhrai looked at the backs bent in toil and said softly: "You're right, Tokarev, they're worth their weight in gold. This is where the steel is being tempered."



They were already nearing their goal, but they were making only slow progress: every day typhoid fever struck down dozens of workers. Pavel had been running a temperature for a long time, but today felt more feverish than usual. He only just managed to stagger to the station, lost his balance and fell.

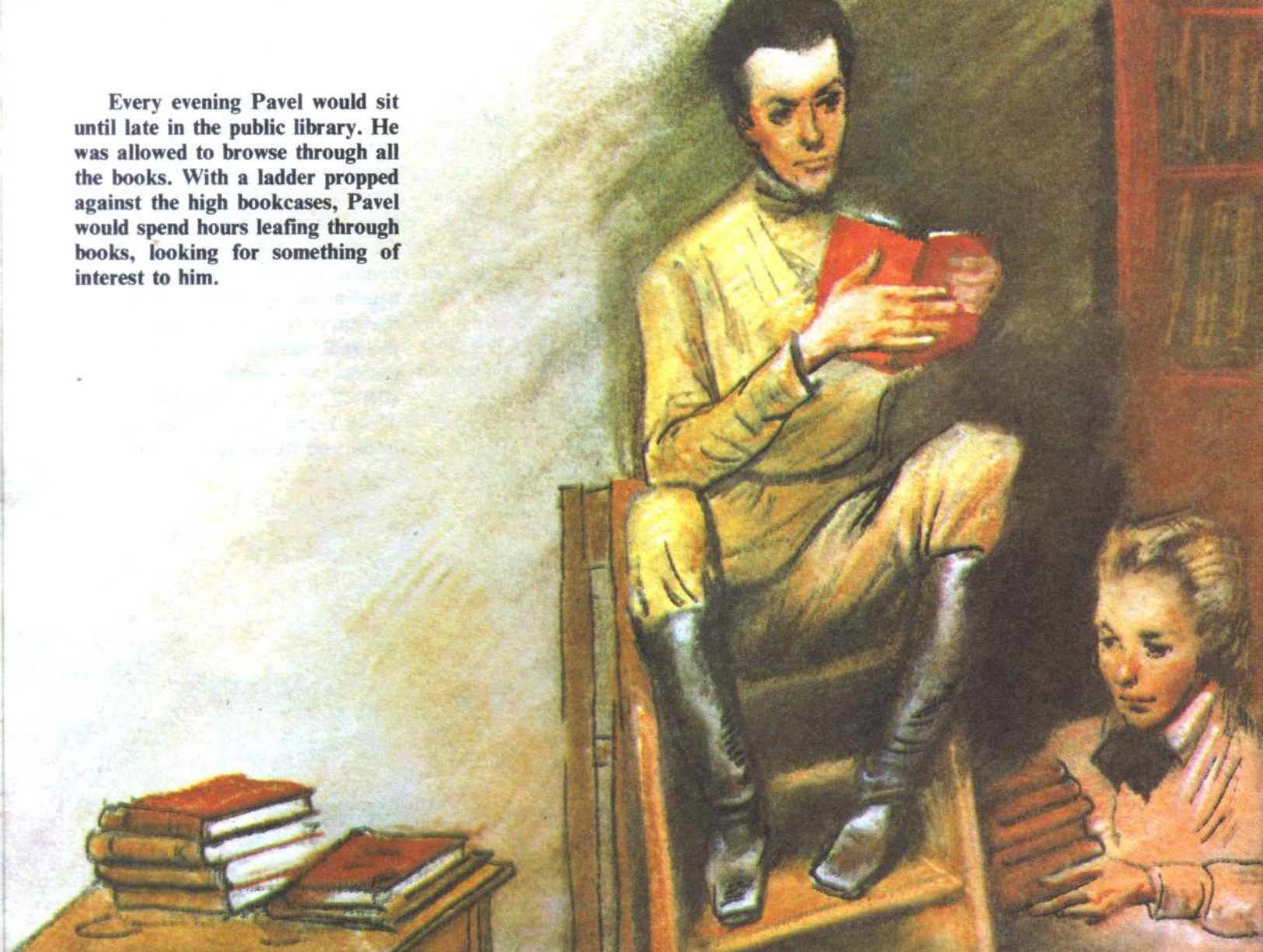
He was found several hours later and carried to the barracks. He was breathing with difficulty and delirious. A doctor's assistant who came over from an armoured train diagnosed acute pneumonia and typhoid fever.

Youth won through, and Pavel was slowly gaining strength again. As he recuperated he spent a lot of time walking, and one day he happened on the cemetery. There it was that he thought: "A person has nothing more precious than life. It is given to him but once, and he must live it so as to feel no regret for wasted years, no shame for a low and petty past, live so as to be able to say on his death: all my life and strength I gave to the finest ideal in the world, the freedom of mankind. We must live life to the utmost, for an absurd illness or tragic accident may cut it short."



Pavel returned to work in the railway workshops as an electrician's assistant. He tried to persuade the secretary of the district Party committee to relieve him from Komsomol leadership work for a time. "Here we are short of hands, and you want to cool your heels in the workshops. Don't tell me you're ill. I want to know what the real reason is." "There is a reason, of course. I want to study." "Aha, so that's what it is. Think I don't want to study?" But in the end the secretary gave in.

Every evening Pavel would sit until late in the public library. He was allowed to browse through all the books. With a ladder propped against the high bookcases, Pavel would spend hours leafing through books, looking for something of interest to him.

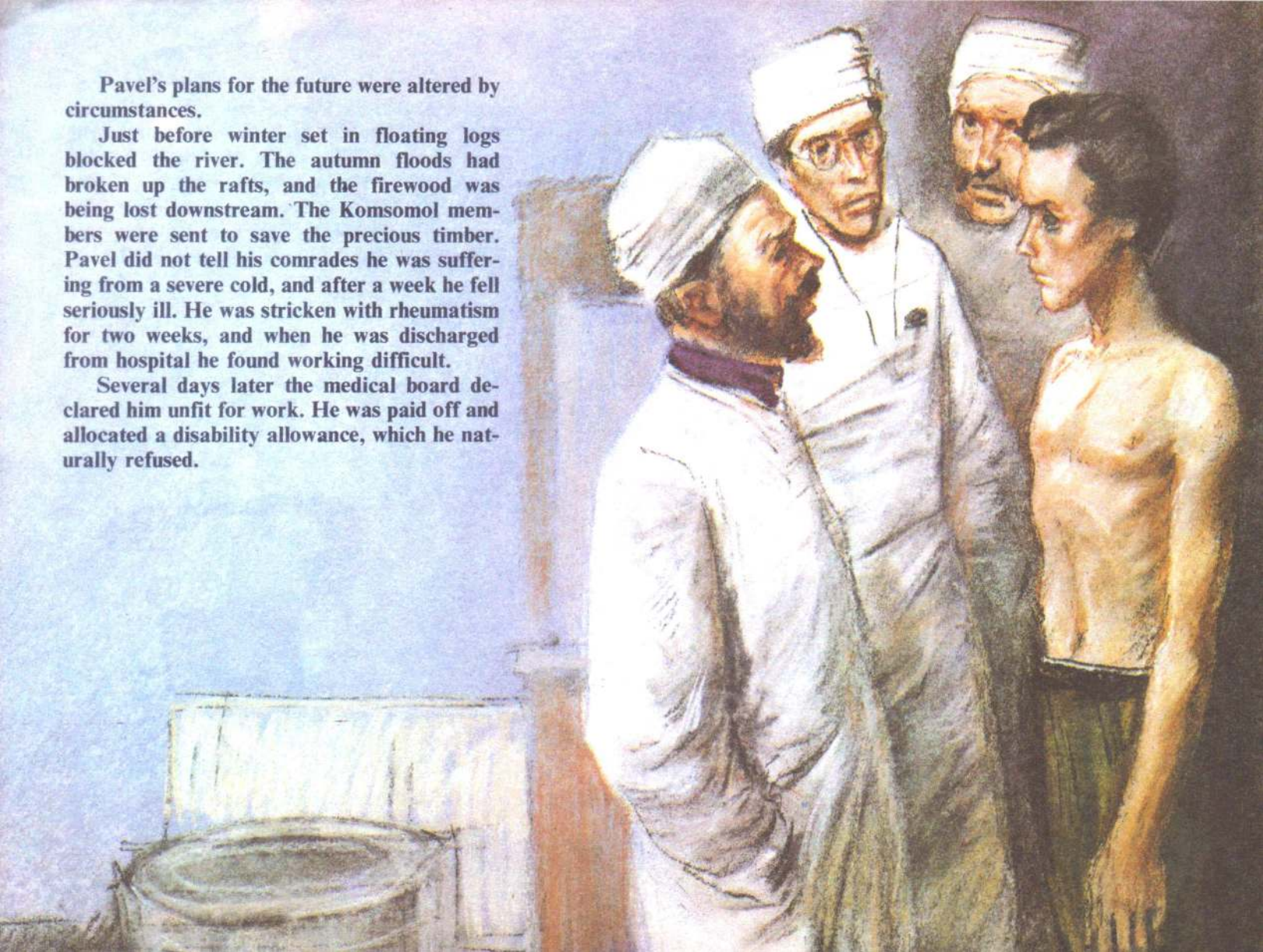


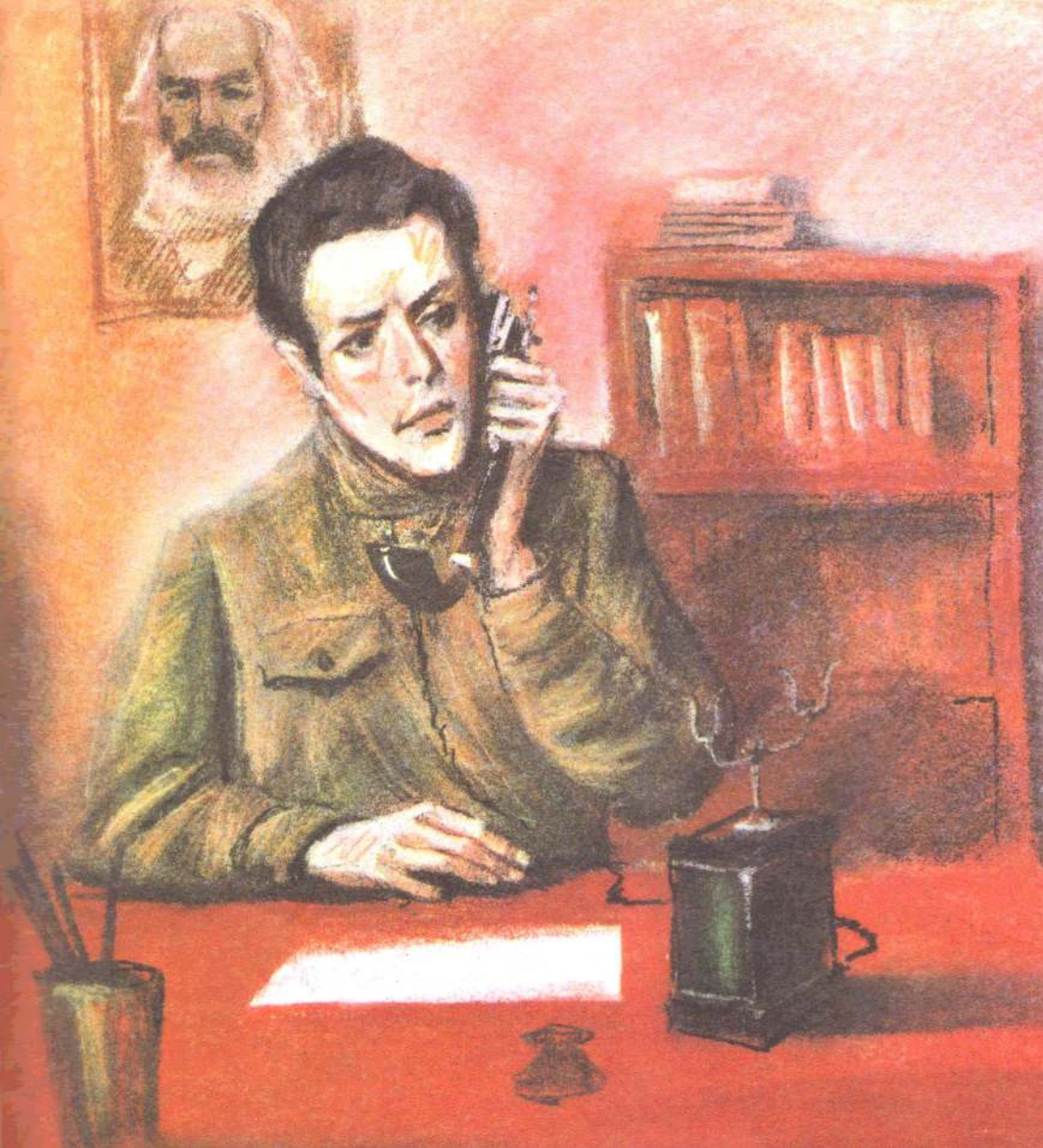
One day Pavel asked Tokarev for a reference to join the Party. Under the heading of length of Party service of those recommending one for membership of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Tokarev wrote 1903 with a firm hand and signed his name. "There you are, my son. I know you'll never bring disgrace upon my grey head."

Pavel's plans for the future were altered by circumstances.

Just before winter set in floating logs blocked the river. The autumn floods had broken up the rafts, and the firewood was being lost downstream. The Komsomol members were sent to save the precious timber. Pavel did not tell his comrades he was suffering from a severe cold, and after a week he fell seriously ill. He was stricken with rheumatism for two weeks, and when he was discharged from hospital he found working difficult.

Several days later the medical board declared him unfit for work. He was paid off and allocated a disability allowance, which he naturally refused.



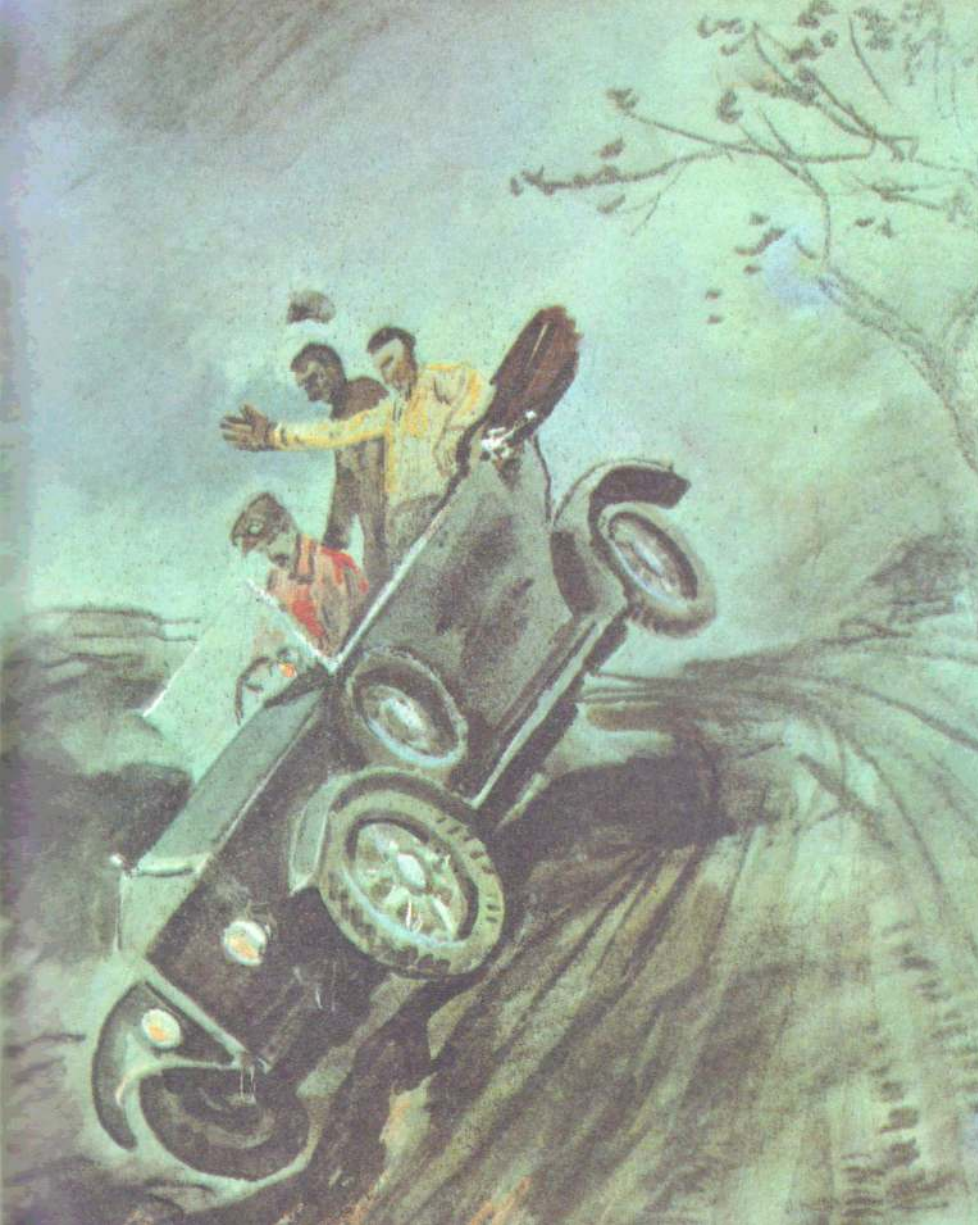


It was no easy matter to break Pavel Korchagin. Just three weeks later the Komsomol sent him on a mission to one of the rural districts, and a year later he was elected secretary of a Komsomol area committee.

When summer arrived Pavel's friends left for their holidays one after the other. He helped them find accommodation at health resorts. When they left he had to do their work as well as his own. His friends returned full of fresh energy and good spirits, and then others left. Throughout the summer someone was always away, and Pavel couldn't take even a day off work. Thus the summer passed; Pavel disliked autumn and winter, for they brought him a great deal of physical suffering.

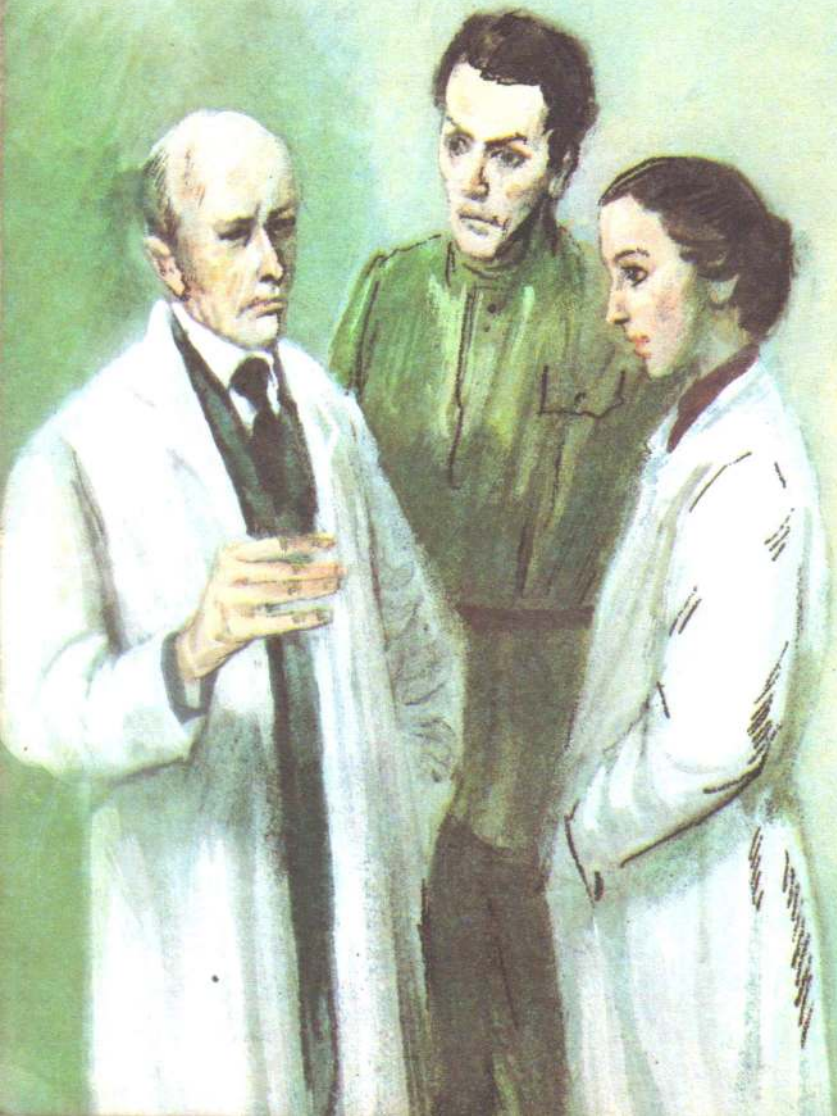
Pavel could not bear to admit even to himself that he was growing weaker from year to year. He could do one of two things: either declare himself an invalid, or stay at his post as long as he could. Pavel chose the latter course of action. One day the doctor said to him: "You don't look too good, Korchagin. You'd better have a thorough examination."

The medical commission recommended "an immediate vacation with a prolonged course of treatment and intensive subsequent treatment. Grave consequences are otherwise inevitable."



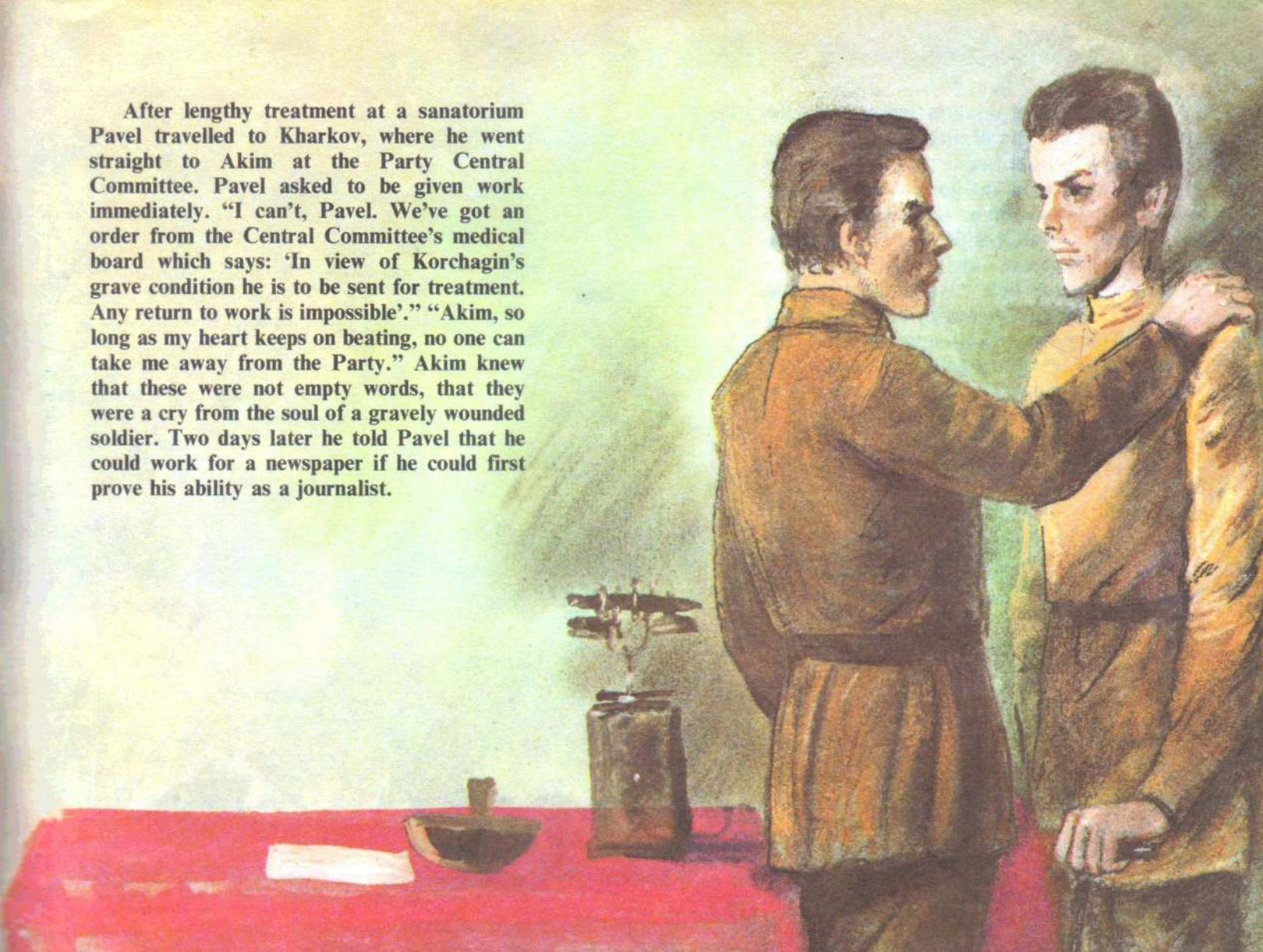
Pavel spent only a week in the sanatorium. He could stand it no longer and left without completing the course of treatment. On his return he was given a new assignment. That autumn the car in which Pavel was travelling skidded into a ditch and overturned.

He wrote to Artem: "Injuries have taken me away from my work again. I've got a new job—that of 'invalid'. I'm in a lot of pain and the end result is loss of movement in my right knee, several sets of stitches on my body and the latest medical pronouncement that a blow to my spine seven years ago may cost me dearly. I'm ready to put up with anything so long as there's a chance I can return to the fight. Tomorrow I leave for a sanatorium. Keep your spirits up. Pavel."

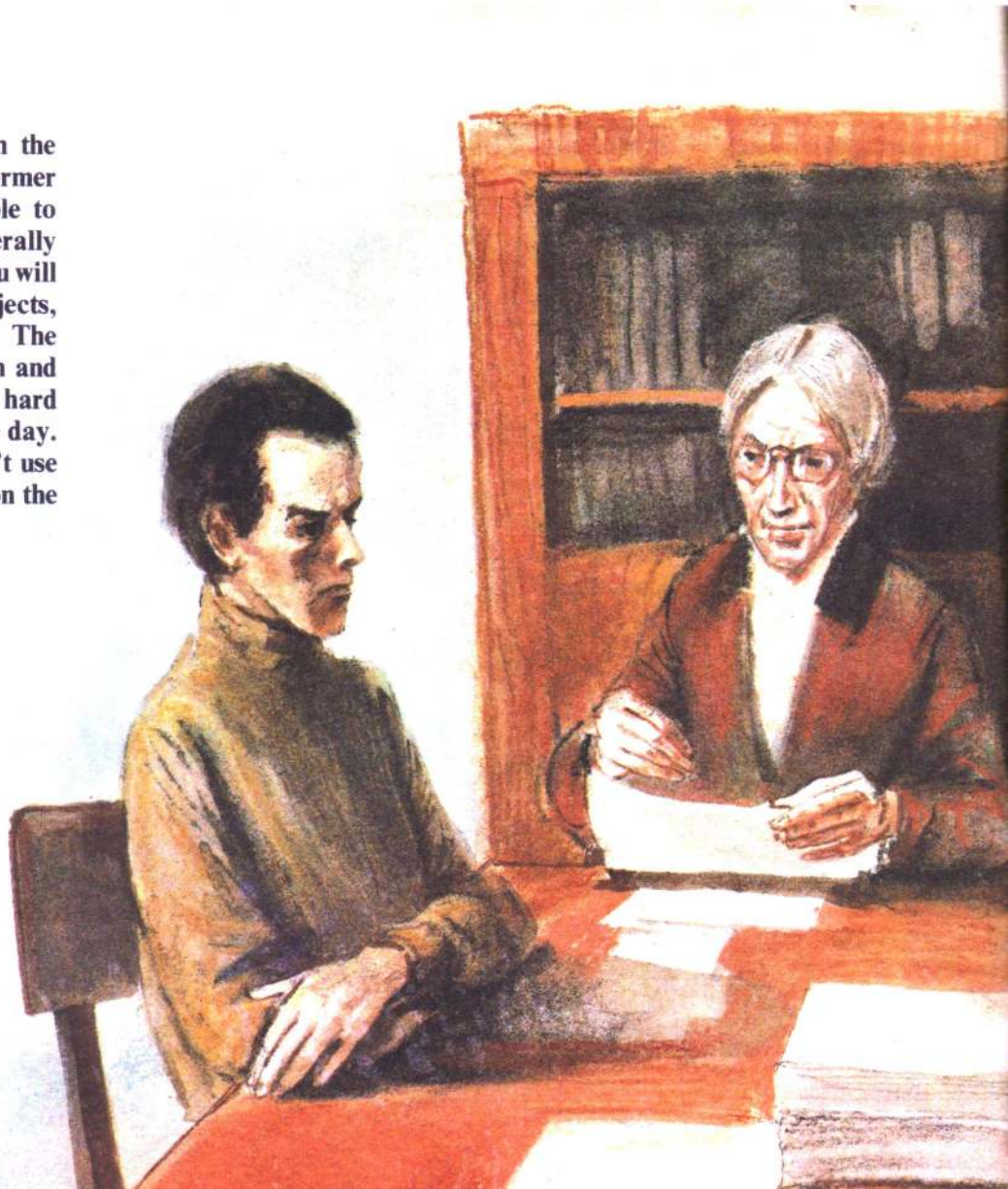


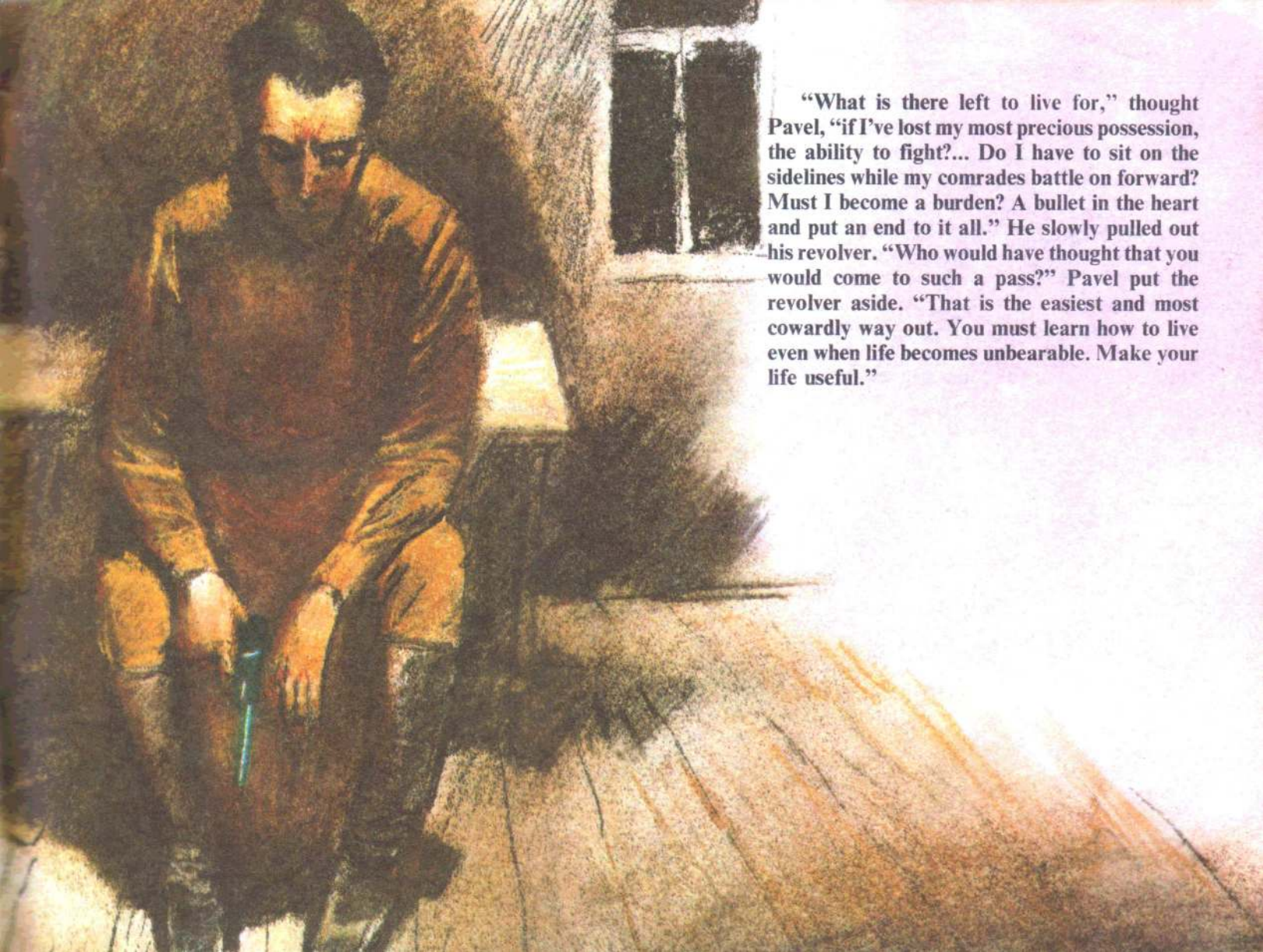
When Doctor Irina Bazhanova discharged Pavel from hospital she suggested that he consulted her father, a famous surgeon. Pavel promptly agreed. The old doctor examined him in his daughter's presence, and left it to her to tell Pavel what he had discovered: "Paralysis lies in store for this young man and we are powerless to avert the tragedy." Irina could not bring herself to tell Pavel everything, and in carefully chosen words told him only a small part of the truth.

After lengthy treatment at a sanatorium Pavel travelled to Kharkov, where he went straight to Akim at the Party Central Committee. Pavel asked to be given work immediately. "I can't, Pavel. We've got an order from the Central Committee's medical board which says: 'In view of Korchagin's grave condition he is to be sent for treatment. Any return to work is impossible'." "Akim, so long as my heart keeps on beating, no one can take me away from the Party." Akim knew that these were not empty words, that they were a cry from the soul of a gravely wounded soldier. Two days later he told Pavel that he could work for a newspaper if he could first prove his ability as a journalist.



Pavel was given a warm reception in the editorial offices. The deputy editor, a former underground worker, said: "We'll be able to give you work to do at home, and generally provide suitable conditions for you. But you will need knowledge on a wide range of subjects, especially literature and language." The woman read the article Pavel had written and sighed: "Comrade Korchagin, with some hard work you might make a good writer some day. But at the present I'm afraid we just can't use you." From that day Pavel's life seemed on the wane. Work was out of the question.

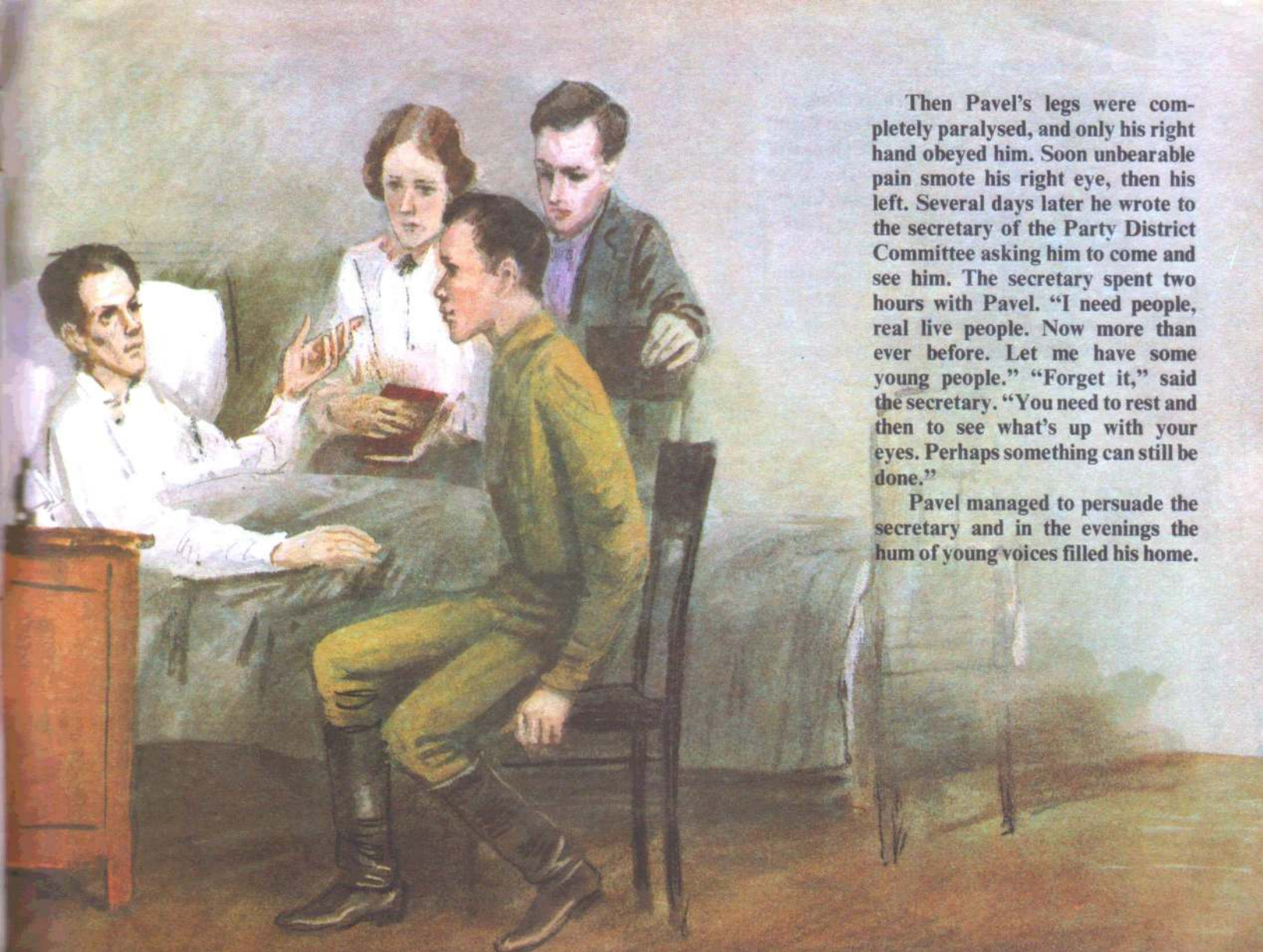




"What is there left to live for," thought Pavel, "if I've lost my most precious possession, the ability to fight?... Do I have to sit on the sidelines while my comrades battle on forward? Must I become a burden? A bullet in the heart and put an end to it all." He slowly pulled out his revolver. "Who would have thought that you would come to such a pass?" Pavel put the revolver aside. "That is the easiest and most cowardly way out. You must learn how to live even when life becomes unbearable. Make your life useful."

Artem did not often get letters from his brother, but the sight of an envelope with the familiar handwriting always disturbed his usual calm. "Things go from bad to worse," wrote Pavel. "I can no longer use my left hand. That was bad enough to begin with, but my legs have let me down, too, and only with difficulty can I get from the bed to the table. Who knows what tomorrow holds in store for me?

"My life is devoted to study. Books, books and more books. I've gone through all the classics and passed the first year exams of the university correspondence course."

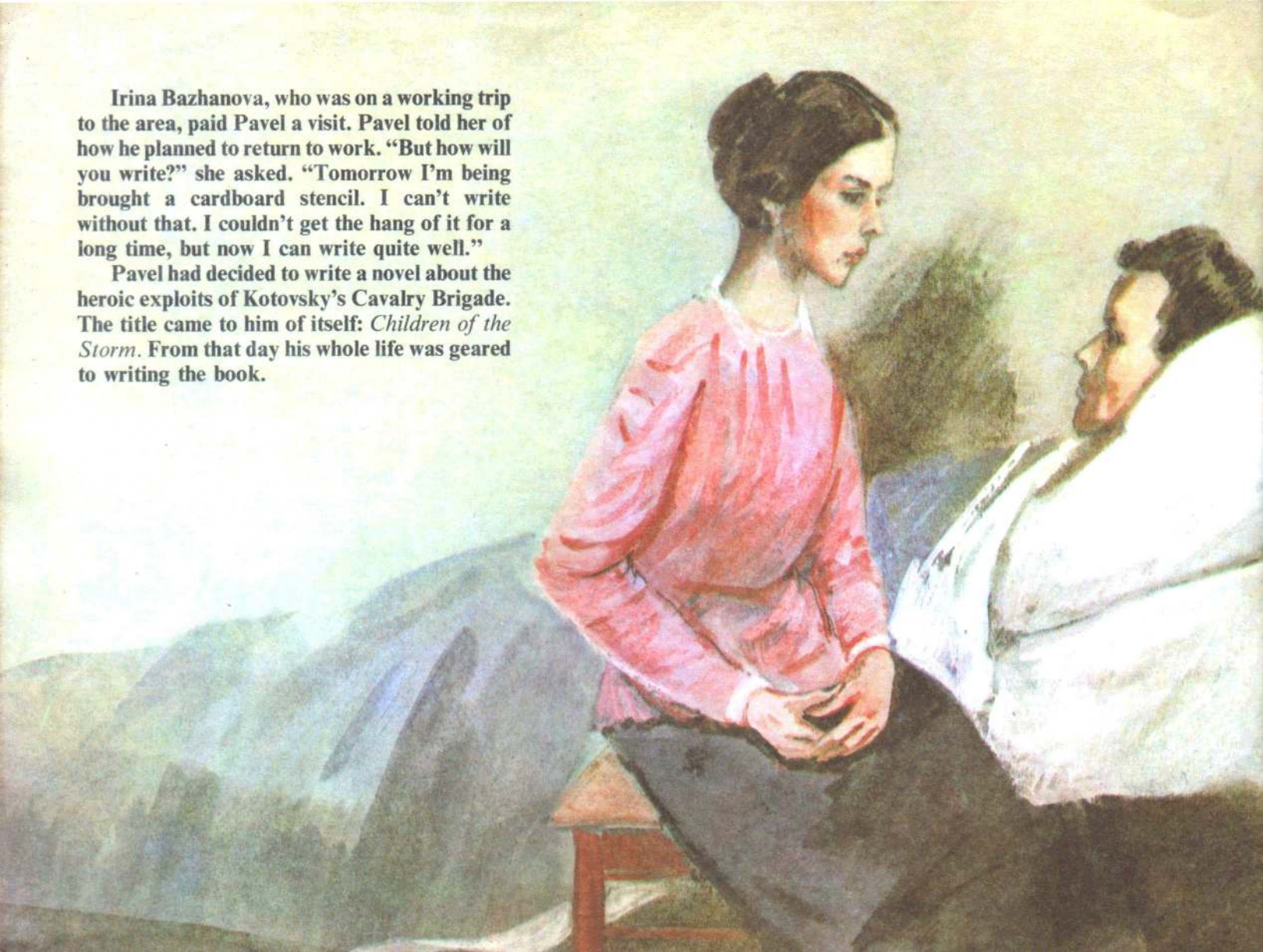


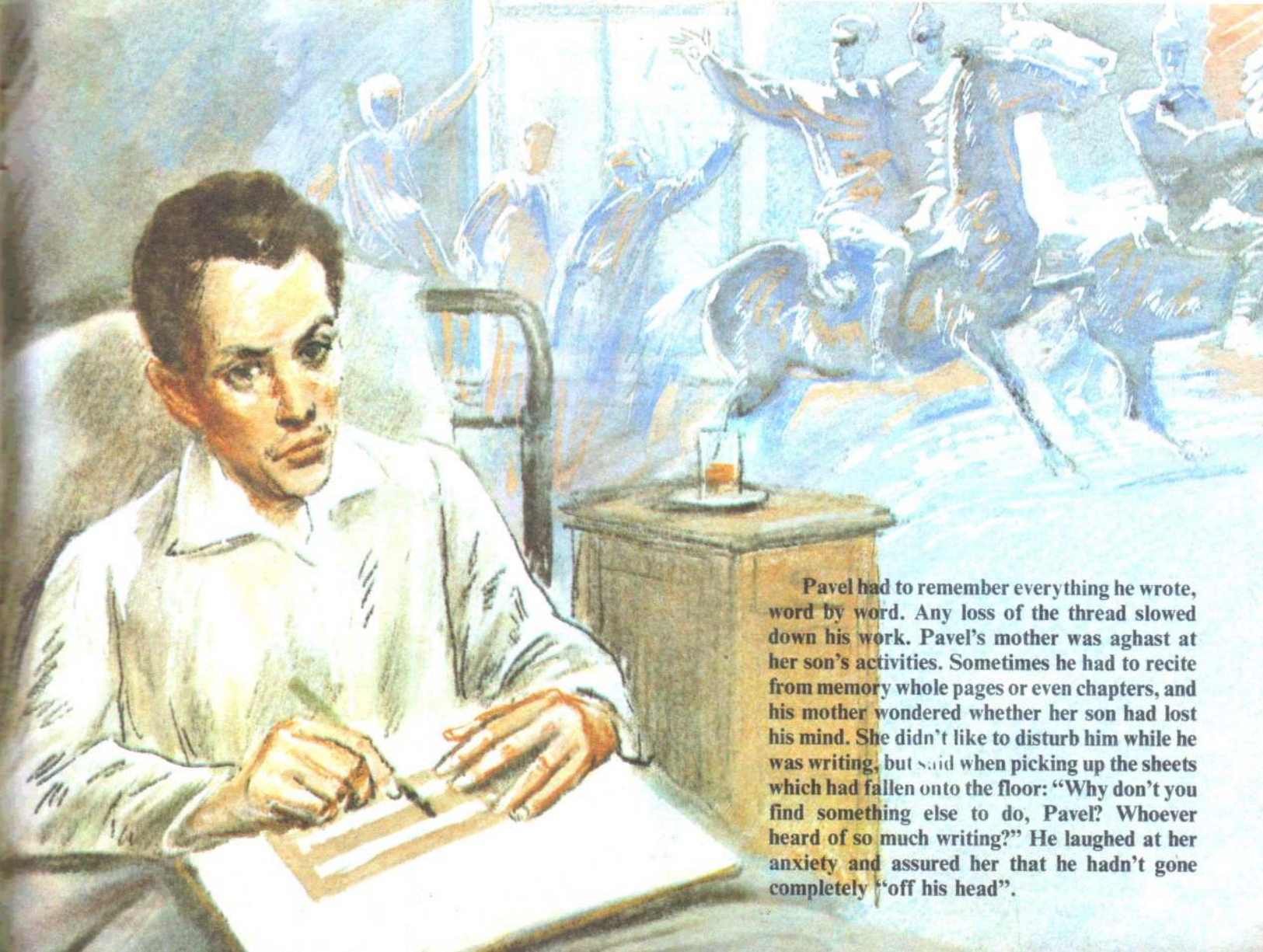
Then Pavel's legs were completely paralysed, and only his right hand obeyed him. Soon unbearable pain smote his right eye, then his left. Several days later he wrote to the secretary of the Party District Committee asking him to come and see him. The secretary spent two hours with Pavel. "I need people, real live people. Now more than ever before. Let me have some young people." "Forget it," said the secretary. "You need to rest and then to see what's up with your eyes. Perhaps something can still be done."

Pavel managed to persuade the secretary and in the evenings the hum of young voices filled his home.

Irina Bazhanova, who was on a working trip to the area, paid Pavel a visit. Pavel told her of how he planned to return to work. "But how will you write?" she asked. "Tomorrow I'm being brought a cardboard stencil. I can't write without that. I couldn't get the hang of it for a long time, but now I can write quite well."

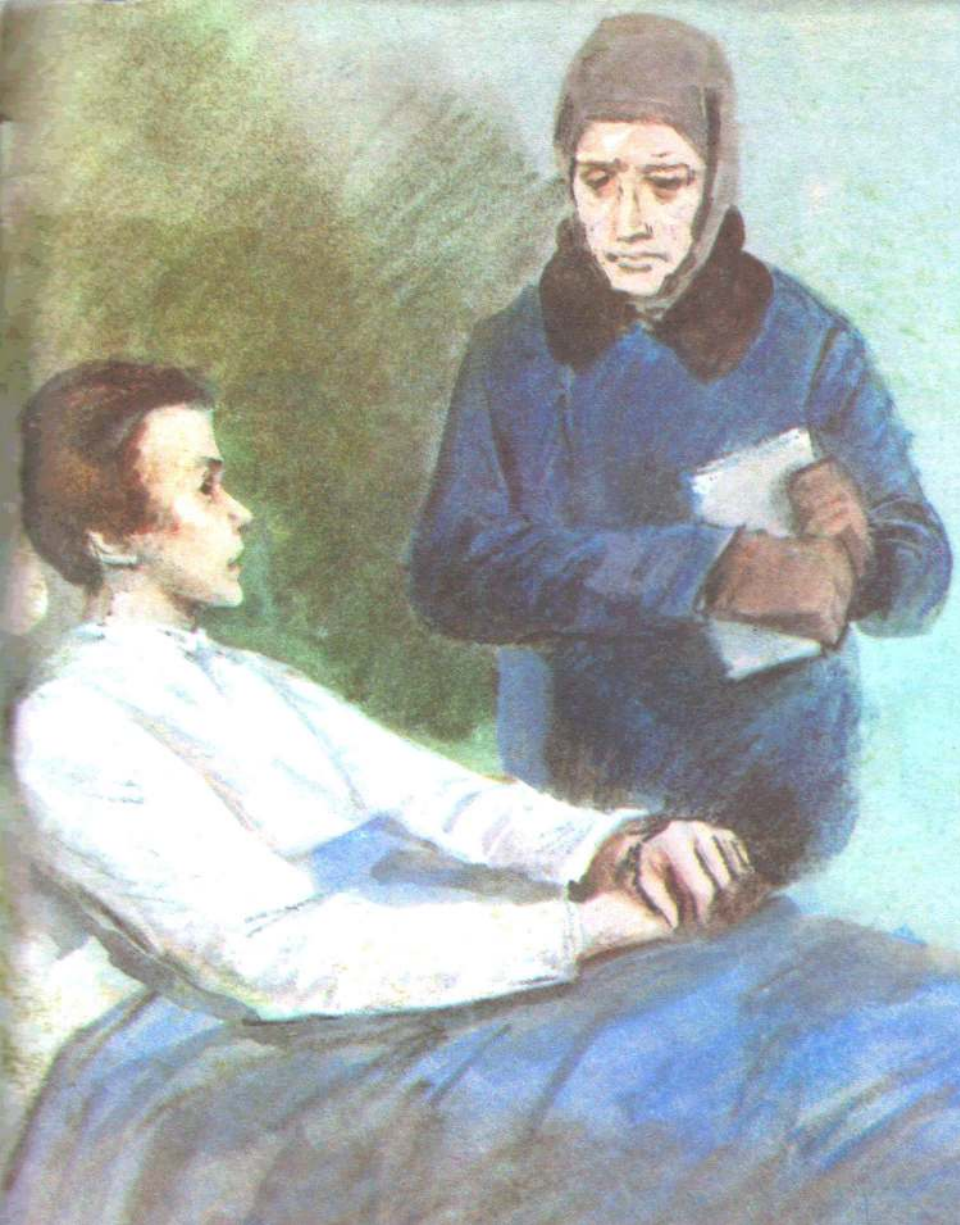
Pavel had decided to write a novel about the heroic exploits of Kotovsky's Cavalry Brigade. The title came to him of itself: *Children of the Storm*. **From that day his whole life was geared to writing the book.**





Pavel had to remember everything he wrote, word by word. Any loss of the thread slowed down his work. Pavel's mother was aghast at her son's activities. Sometimes he had to recite from memory whole pages or even chapters, and his mother wondered whether her son had lost his mind. She didn't like to disturb him while he was writing, but said when picking up the sheets which had fallen onto the floor: "Why don't you find something else to do, Pavel? Whoever heard of so much writing?" He laughed at her anxiety and assured her that he hadn't gone completely "off his head".

The young girl Galya came to help Pavel with his work. He dictated to her, and his book went at twice the speed. When Pavel fell into thought his eyelashes flickered and his eyes changed colour, and Galya found it hard to believe that he couldn't see. At the end of the day she would read back what she had taken down and see him frown as he listened intently. "What are you frowning for? It's good." "No, it's not, Galya." He would himself rewrite what he wasn't happy with, sometimes losing patience and giving up. He would break his pencil in boundless fury at life for taking away his sight, and bite his lips until the blood came.



The last chapter was finished. For several days Galya read Pavel his novel. The next day the manuscript would be sent to Leningrad. The fate of the book would decide Pavel's own fate. Total rejection would mean the twilight of his days. If failure was partial and the faults could be remedied by further work, he would launch a fresh attack immediately.

Pavel's mother took the heavy package to the post office, and days of agonising waiting began. Pavel lived for the morning and evening post, but nothing came from Leningrad.

The silence was so long as to be ominous. Pavel admitted to himself that unconditional rejection would be the end of him. In such moments he asked himself again and again whether he had done all he could to break out of the iron vice, to return to the fight, to make his life useful. He felt that he had. Many days later, when the suspense was almost unbearable, his mother came into the room, exclaiming: "A telegram from Leningrad!" It said: "Novel wholeheartedly approved. Starting publication. Congratulations on your success."

Pavel's heart quickened. His cherished dream had come true. The iron vice had been broken, and once again, armed with a new weapon, he was returning to the fight and to life.

Translated from the Russian
by **Sheena Wakefield**

Автор-составитель **Олег Тихомиров**
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